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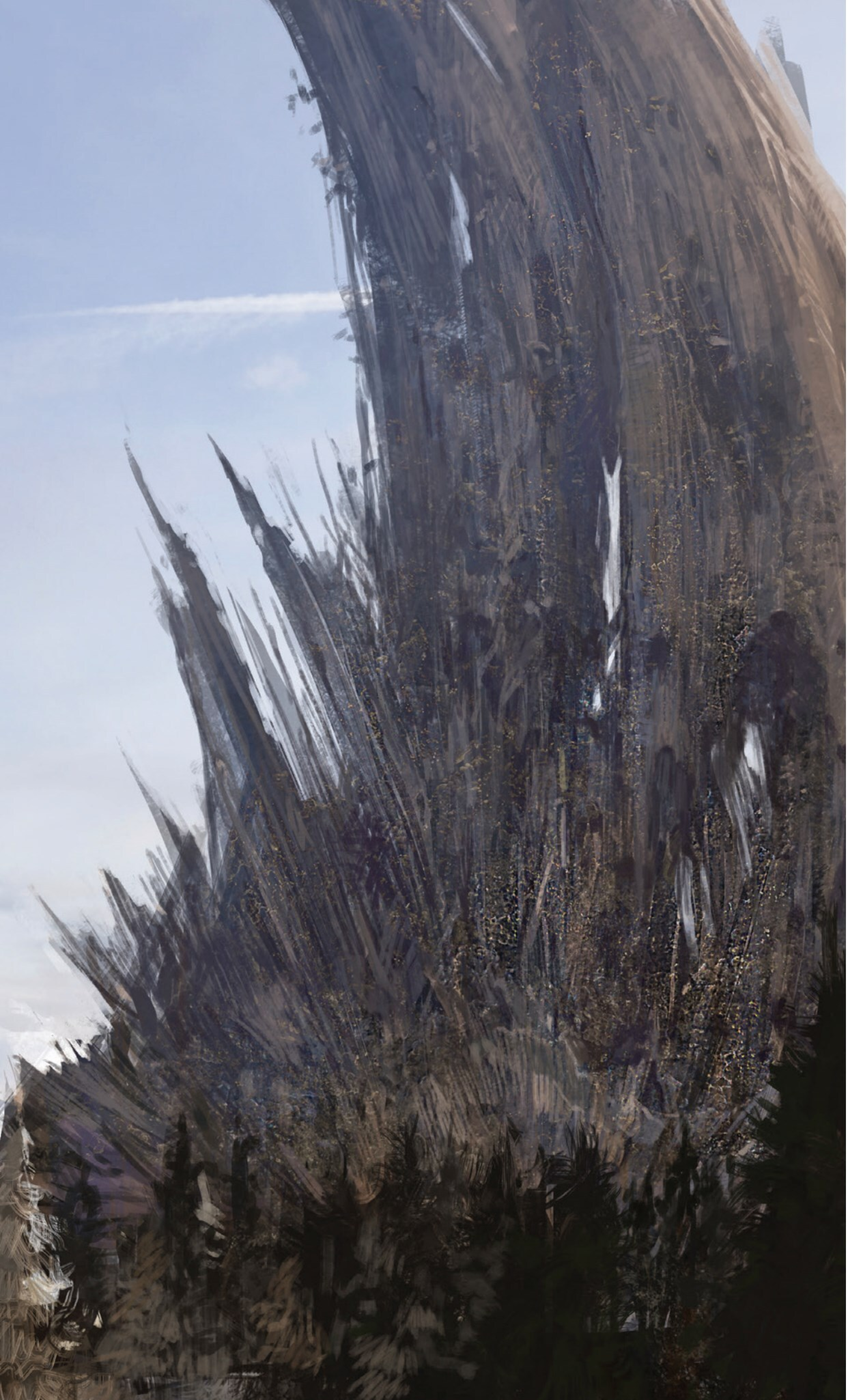

↘

Forspoken concept art

Two massive rock formations, strange and horn-like, that form a towering ring in the sky.

Developed by Luminous Productions

Published by Square Enix

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE BIGGER THE GAME, THE FEWER OTHERS WE PLAY

WE'RE JUST A COUPLE OF MONTHS INTO THE YEAR, and I'm already intimidated by my 2022 backlog. As I work through Horizon Forbidden West, off in the distance, Elden Ring, Lost Ark, and Pokémon Legends: Arceus call to me like the beating in "The Tell-Tale Heart," begging to be played. When my friends hop online, progress in these single-player titles comes to a halt so I can focus on Fortnite Chapter 3, Season 2, Dying Light 2 Stay Human, and Destiny 2: The Witch Queen. On top of these games, I somehow must find time to check out The Artful Escape, Sifu, and OlliOlli World.

Writing about how far behind I am in my gaming stresses me out. By the end of each year, I always have an unwieldy tower of games I want to spend time with, but it doesn't consist of the big "must-plays" like I'm falling behind on now. Unlike new movies and TV shows, which take little time to watch, most of the games I mentioned are massive in size, demanding dozens of hours to complete.

The problem (which is also a great thing) is developers don't want us to put their games down. They want us to lose ourselves in their worlds and be there when new content unlocks. Games like Lost Ark and World of Warcraft have earned the title of "forever games" since they seemingly don't end – so long as players return. Some of my friends, who used to play dozens of games in a year, now only play a few and are hooked on forever experiences.

Getting more bang for our buck from games is incredible, but I often find my enjoyment with them interrupted by a series of questions: Should I just stick to the critical path to reduce my time commitment? If I'm not engaging in much side content, am I genuinely experiencing the game? If I put this 100-hour-plus game down for a week to play something else, will I be able to slide back into it, or will my 40-hour playthrough up to this point go to waste?

I want to play all the big games in a year, but when they are gargantuan in size, concessions are inevitable, either within that game or avoiding others. My parents watched all the Oscar-nominated films in two weeks. How many weeks (if not months) would it take to play all of a year's great games? These days, we're spoiled with entertainment, but are we getting too much, even if we play just one game? I would love to hear your thoughts on this subject and include a couple of your letters in next month's Replies section.

In the meantime, check out the review section on page 72 to read about some of the year's best games.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Horizon Forbidden West, Elden Ring

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Raising Dion, Year of the Rabbit

WHAT I'M READING
Radiant Black, Fantastic Four

WHAT I'M COLLECTING
Star Wars: The Black Series

GAMEINFORMER
FORSPOKEN

FORSPOKEN

On our cover, reluctant hero Frey rides a wave of conflict, even as the evil Tanta sorceresses and their corrupted creatures lurk in the background. Art director Yuuki Matsuzawa created the colorful spread; the artist also crafted *Game Informer*'s Final Fantasy XV cover.

Our 14-page Forspoken cover story is based on a nearly 30-minute hands-off demo Square Enix prepared for us on February 8, along with insight from various members of the Forspoken team to learn how this fairytale world and new IP came to life.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

John Carson

Associate Editor

As a fighting game fan, I hope the genre is on the brink of a renaissance. Not only are series like Guilty Gear and The King of Fighters embracing better online netcode, but newcomers like DNF Duel are making gameplay more accessible by implementing simpler inputs for special moves. Fighters radiate excitement when someone can easily perform flashy moves and combos. Lowering the technical barrier to entry for new players could go a long way to broaden the appeal of these games for players and fans of competitive games alike.

Kristin Williams

Web Designer/Programmer

When I need a break, I often find myself returning to old favorites to relax. Lately, that means I'm reading Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels. I've picked up books from the series here and there but never read it in its entirety. Reading the series in published order is giving me a new appreciation for Pratchett's wit, humor, and world-building. After watching *Good Omens* on TV, I'm looking forward to seeing more of his work adapted for other mediums.

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spotlight

10 INTO THE MULTIVERSE OF THE METAVERSE

The metaverse has quickly taken over the game industry, with companies worldwide jumping on the bandwagon. But why? We talked to a handful of developers (and skeptics) about their thoughts on this new frontier in gaming.

16 GOTTA RANK 'EM ALL

There is, frankly, an absurd amount of these little monsters. The resident *Game Informer* Pokémaniacs recently put their heads together to determine the best of each type.

34 COVER STORY – FORSPOKEN

Coming from a new studio within Square Enix, Luminous Productions' Forspoken has more than piqued our interest. Check out our in-depth cover story for developer insights, a behind-the-scenes look at gameplay, and an exclusive look at a new region.

48 TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

Gearbox is back with another entry in its over-the-top Borderlands series. But this time, the focus is on Tiny Tina. We played a handful of hours, chatted with the development team, and gathered what you need to know.

54 EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: RISING

Several key developers behind Suikoden are back with the prologue to their spiritual successor: Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising. We talked to the team members about this companion game.

regulars

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26 GEAR // **60** PREVIEWS // **72** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING

SALTY OR SWEET?
YOU DON'T NEED TO DECIDE
DON'T PICK A SIDE
THIS ONE TIME
TWIX
SALTED Caramel

*Product illustrated to show salted caramel experience

©2022 MARS OR AFFILIATES

Replies

ELDEN RING

First off, cheers to Dan Tack for writing a cover story that had me hanging on every word. It was one of the most exciting stories I've ever read! Seeing how From Software is adapting the Souls experience to an open world format has me thinking that the developer will try it with other genres and game designs. Do you think the next Armored Core game (which we learned about through an online leak) will be faithful to the series or adapt Souls-like elements? I'm hoping it's the latter. From Software is on a roll with it, and I can see it working with this series. **– Del Montero, San Francisco, CA**

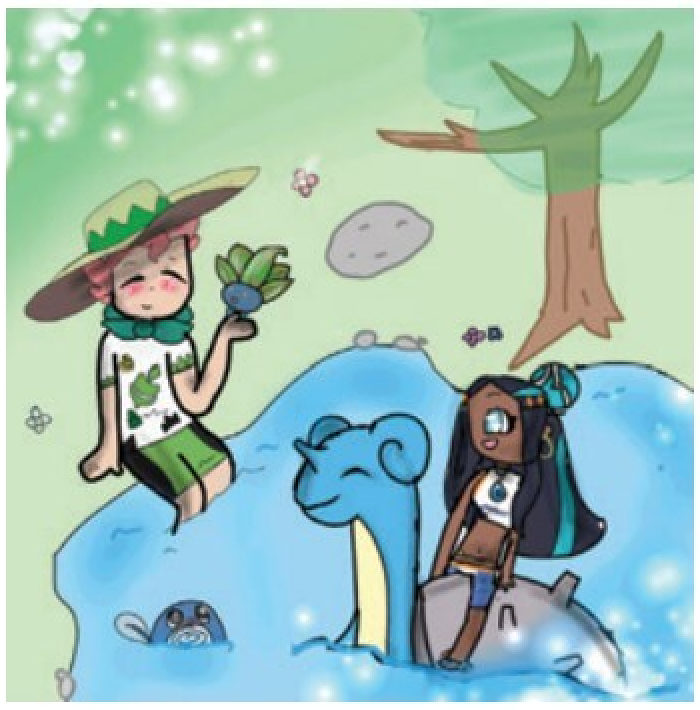
↳ *From Software has not officially acknowledged working on an Armored Core game. But if we had to guess what a modern entry in that series would look like, it'd be an Armored Souls experience – pulling vital elements from both of From Software's successful series to create something new that would appeal to both crowds. We can see it now: Giant robots hidden behind energized doorways. Freedom of exploration enhanced by your mech's frame. A wide selection of weapons leads to custom classes. And all components obtained in a run are lost unless they are retrieved. We can't wait to see what From Software's future holds, but we should all temper our expectations. Luckily, there are plenty of great Souls experiences already available.*

I tried playing Dark Souls 1 and 2 back in the day, and they just crushed my spirits. I'm not built for brutally difficult games and hope From Software someday adds in difficulty options for players like me. Do you ever see this happening, or is the crushing challenge too big a part of the Souls DNA? **– Kenneth Andersen, via email**

↳ *This is a question we hear often and has to be something From Software weighs with each release. We doubt we'll ever see options along the lines of "easy," "medium," and "hard," but don't be surprised if From Software finds in-game ways of creating significant player advantages. There are many ways to help take the edge off Elden Ring's considerable challenges. Players can reduce the difficulty by leveling up, gearing up, or calling in other players to assist with challenging boss battles. Elden Ring is also an open world, which means if you get stuck on a problematic enemy or area, you have tons of other options to explore.*

[Elden Ring] is the first game I've preordered in years. I beat each of the Souls games except Demon's Souls, and they are games that make you feel more accomplished than any other. Beating Sekiro (From's best game) just feels great once everything clicks. They all have that "a-ha" moment where the game becomes instinctual. **– Joodonkadon via Discord**

↳ *From Software's suite of intense, challenging action RPGs presents the players with impossibilities that eventually become possible, creating an experience unlike much else. The feeling of finally overcoming the undefeatable is tough to match!*



Reader art submission:
Daria Dawson, age 11

MORE HANDHELDS?

What goes through game characters' minds when they run into an invisible wall? Do their societies believe it's a sign of divine intervention? Do animals crash into them like pigeons into windows?
– @_GameSage_ via Twitter

↳ ***A developer needs to turn an invisible wall moment like the one you described into a huge narrative plot twist along the lines of M. Night Shyamalan's work. We'd also like to hear characters tell us why they can't climb over small objects blocking alleyways and explain once and for all why they need to destroy every wooden box they see.***

MOVING TO PC

Since it is impossible to find a PlayStation 5, I have decided to leave gaming consoles. Keep in mind I have been a console gamer since day one. I have never had or owned a gaming PC. So why the radical change? I am tired of gaming consoles due to their many issues, such as bad disc drives, overheating, and other various things. So, I think the best logical move is to build my gaming PC one part at a time. Unlike a gaming console, I will only have to occasionally upgrade my video card, not buy another new console every five years. **– Sal via email**

↳ ***Do extensive research before buying and building your PC. There are plenty of great resources out there, and if you don't want to take a chance on component compatibility issues, explore companies like NZXT, which bundle parts together for you to build. We're hoping PlayStation 5s and Xbox Series Xs become bountiful, but the demand still greatly outweighs Sony and Microsoft's production. We don't see their scarcity diminishing any time soon.***

MORE THAN A MAGAZINE

Game Informer has become one of the most significant parts of my life. I get the magazine in the mail each month, watch Replay on Fridays, and now have four excellent *Game Informer* podcasts to listen to when driving to work and the grocery store. Thank you for all of the insight into games and for all of the laughs your outstanding personalities bring.
– Jennifer Bektas via email

SUPERHERO PROBLEMS

So if water hurt Cole in Infamous, did he just never shower? Did he shower really fast? Was he able to use electricity to burn off the germs and smells? **– Greg Miller, Kinda Funny Games**

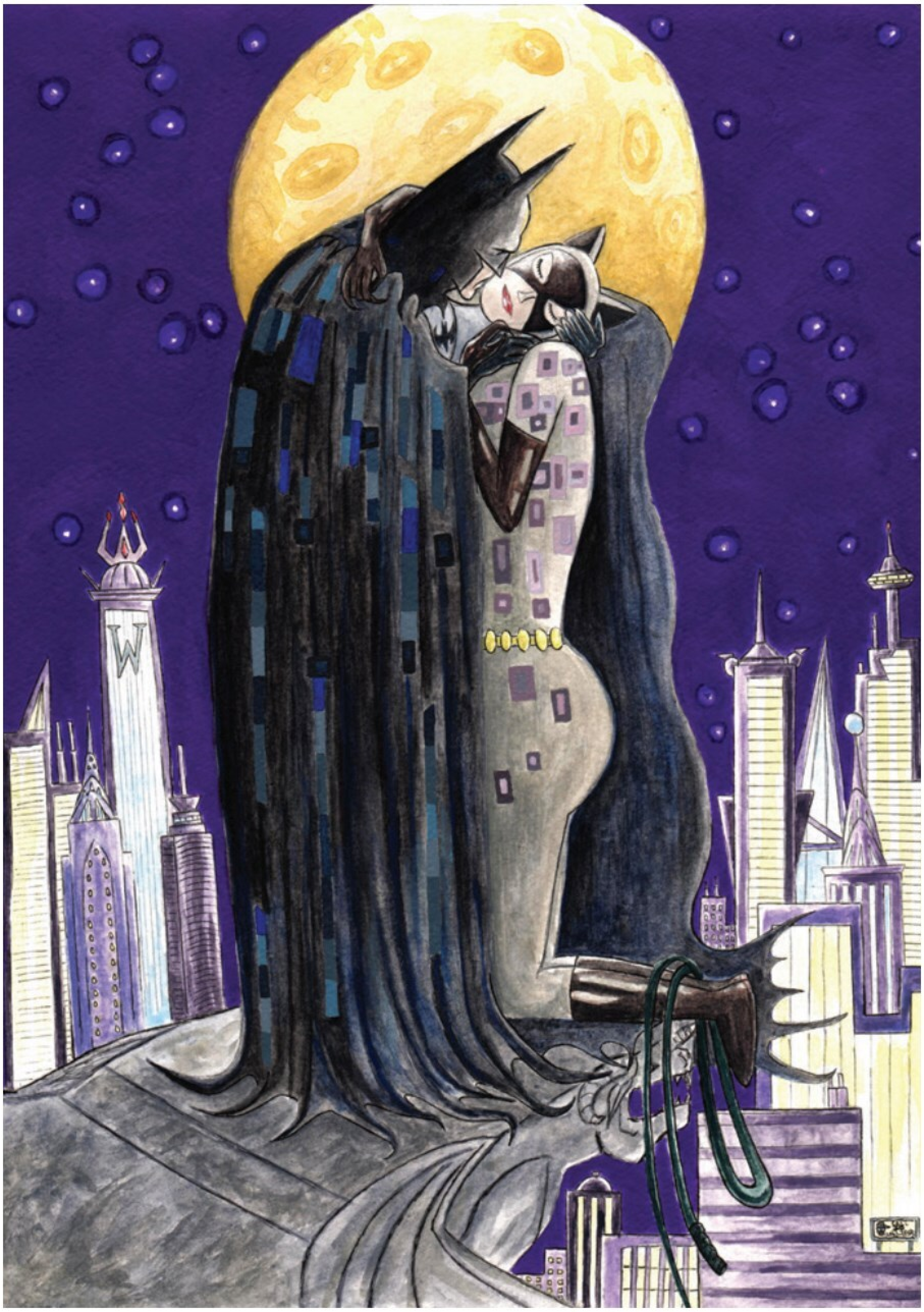
↳ ***Reiner: I believe Cole can bathe using a sponge with light amounts of water on it, but I would much prefer him gaining stink powers in a sequel. He could call himself the Electric Skunk or something.***

↳ ***Brian: Have you seen him in those games? Just be glad Sony invested heavily in 3D TVs during that era instead of TVs that let you smell the action.***

↳ ***Blake: That question's pretty funny.***

↘
Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com



Reader art submission: Silverio Godinez

NINTENDO IS DISNEY?

I sometimes hear Nintendo referred to as "the Disney of video games." I can understand this comparison in some respects: the recognizable mascots, oodles of money being made, the theme parks, the colorful history, and the child-like aesthetic of some of their content, to name a few. However, I see several key differences: Mainly that Nintendo isn't afraid to slap its name on a big Mature-rated game like Bayonetta [2] or (infamously) Devil's Third. They also more regularly suffer from failed products and ad campaigns (like the Wii U) that they take visible steps to fix. I know the comparison is mainly symbolic and not that deep, but what do y'all think? Is Nintendo the Disney of video games? **–Dominic Cichocki, Lisle, IL**

↳ *In terms of creating family-friendly experiences often involving animals? Yes, Nintendo and Disney's old animation business line up remarkably well. Flash forwards a couple of decades, and Disney now looks more like Microsoft from numerous company acquisitions to help flesh out a burgeoning streaming service. Comparisons aside, there is no company like Nintendo, which has cornered the video game market in such a unique way.*

Reader art submission: Amanda Langley

THE RESURRECTION & REINVENTION OF TELLTALE GAMES

How the studio that revitalized the adventure genre is revitalizing itself

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

TELLTALE LOVE

I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate the article you did on Telltale [Games]. Many of their games have changed me for the better. I am 34 years old with a 12-year-old daughter. A few years ago, I bought her Minecraft Story Mode, and she couldn't put the games down, episode after episode. Once she finished season 2, episode 4, I went to buy episode 5 only to find it was no longer sold. You can imagine her disappointment when I looked it up and saw that Telltale closed doors; she even cried! After seeing your article, I went back to see if we could finally finish that last episode, and to my surprise, it was still unavailable. My daughter has asked about it several times over the years. Do you know when or if they will be offering the Minecraft Story Mode episodes again? It would make one little girl very happy! **– Del Montero, San Francisco, CA**

↳ *Gaming's digital landscape can be a cruel place. Popular MMOs like Star Wars Galaxy no longer exist, and the same goes for Minecraft Story Mode. The game was delisted on June 25, 2019, and a Telltale spokesperson tells us that the rights reverted to Mojang/Microsoft. It would be up to Microsoft to bring it back, which isn't out of the realm of possibility. At this point, the best bet for your daughter is to find a commentary-free playthrough online to see how the story concludes.*

PLAYSTATION SERIES X

Will PlayStation and Microsoft ever team up to make one killer console to end all "console war" debates? **– "C" via Twitter**

↳ *There's a better chance of Half-Life 3 happening, and most* Game Informer *staffers put that in the realm of "never!" That said, as games move more into the streaming space, we could potentially see a TV with both Sony and Microsoft apps on it.*

SCALEBOUND

I will tell you this: I have a PlayStation 5, and I'm a PlayStation gamer, but if they resurrect Scalebound, it will make me want to purchase an Xbox Series X. That's no cap, all facts! Make it happen! **– Erickson_Orlando_Erijtheartist via Instagram**

↳ *Scalebound may have some life again, but don't get your hopes up just yet. In an interview with* IGN Japan, *Platinum Games' president Atsushi Inaba said Scalebound's creator Hideki Kamiya has shown interest in working on the canceled game again. Kamiya responded by saying, "I'd like to appeal to [Microsoft's] Phil Spencer directly! Let's do it, Phil!" Moving Scalebound to new hardware and giving it a different focus may be something Microsoft will entertain, but for now, the publisher isn't saying anything publicly.*

THE YEAR OF VR

Andrew Reiner's letter about the Year of VR made me run out and buy a [Meta] Rift 2. I was a little leery of my purchase since I hadn't seen anyone talking about it lately. Within seconds of booting up the headset, I was in awe of what I was seeing. Just standing in the lobby where you pick games is a transformative experience. It really feels like you are in a different world! I have now played over a dozen games on it and am hooked beyond belief. This is a whole new type of gaming and it's every bit as amazing as playing on console. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for opening my eyes to the future!
– Ted Cavuto via email

↳ *We're glad you are enjoying your Rift 2! One of the best experiences with VR is seeing how other people react when putting on a headset for the first time. The sense of wonder and awe that washes over their face is always fun to see. If you are looking for new game recommendations, we suggest looking at Zenith: The Last City, an MMO with superhero-like movement.*

UNCHARTED

I saw Tom Holland's *Uncharted* in the movie theater and walked out wanting a sequel and another game. Seeing that the movie is doing well, we'll likely get a follow up, but what are the odds of another game?
– Emma Wells, Rockford, IL

↳ *Uncharted 4 brought closure for many of the characters, but left the door open for a new generation of treasure hunters. We wouldn't be surprised if Naughty Dog eventually picks up this narrative thread to focus on a new protagonist with some familiar faces along for the ride as mentors. That said, what we want most is another new intellectual property from Naughty Dog. Every new idea the studio touches turns to gold and we're due for another new experience from it.*

Poll:

Which visual aspect do you prioritize the most?

FRAMERATE – 63%

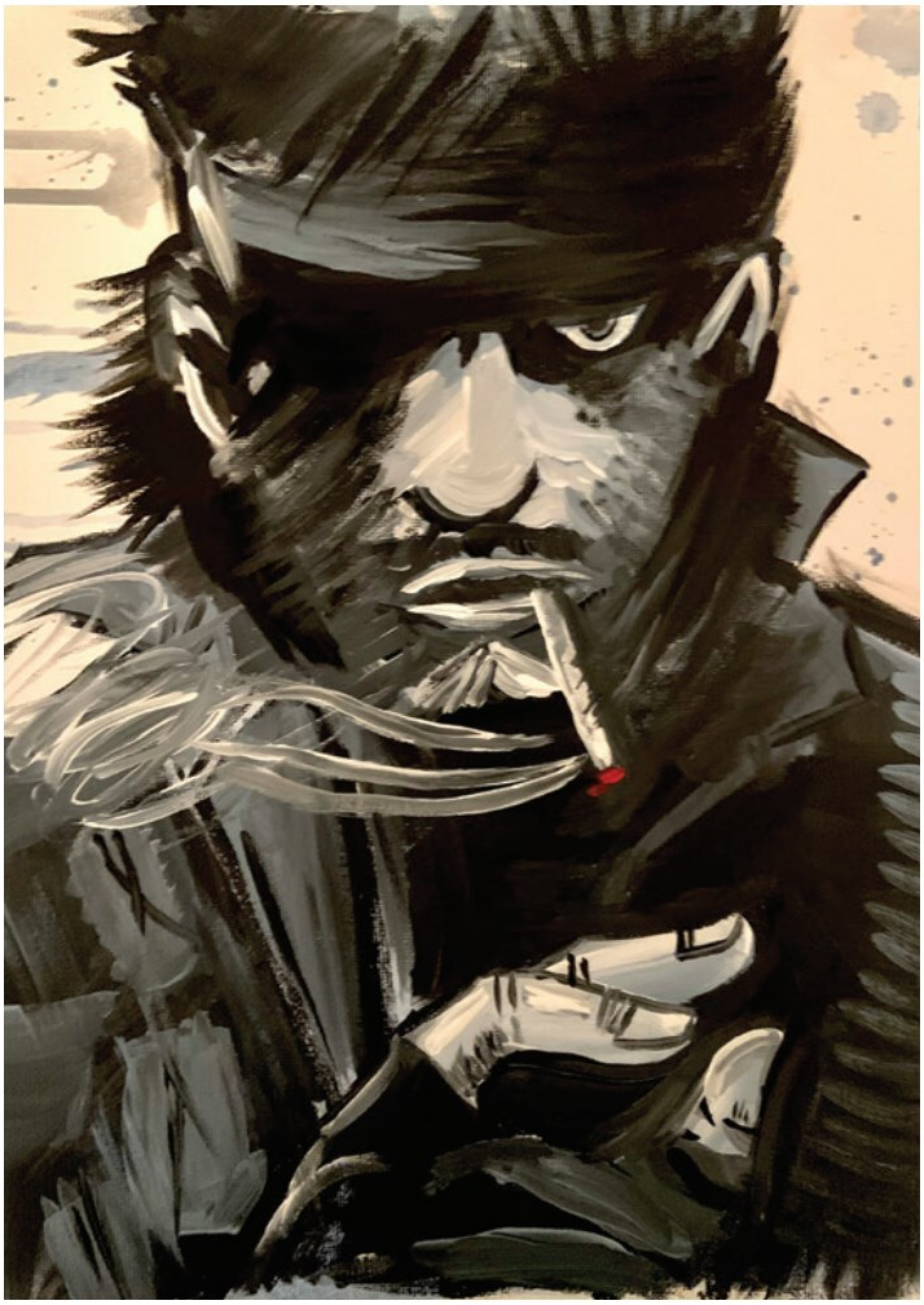
GRAPHICAL QUALITY – 23%

RESOLUTION – 8%

Poll conducted on Twitter

THANK YOU!

No one outright says this, but we all are thankful for it every day: Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo deserve our sincerest thanks for making amazing controllers. I grew up with the Sega Genesis and Atari Lynx. We have come a looooong way since then! **– Andrew Humphries, Oakland, CA**



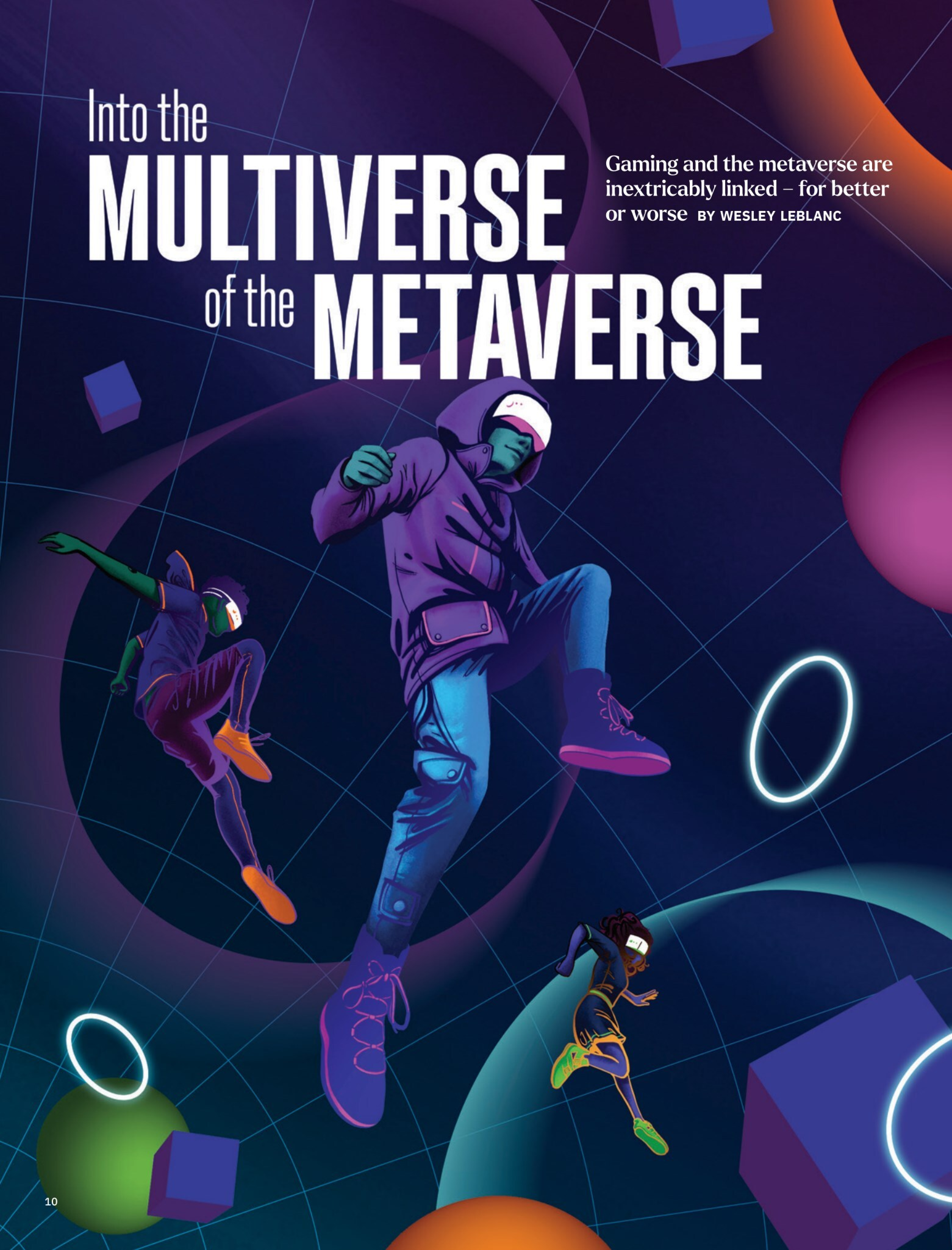
Reader art winner: Jesse Lemons

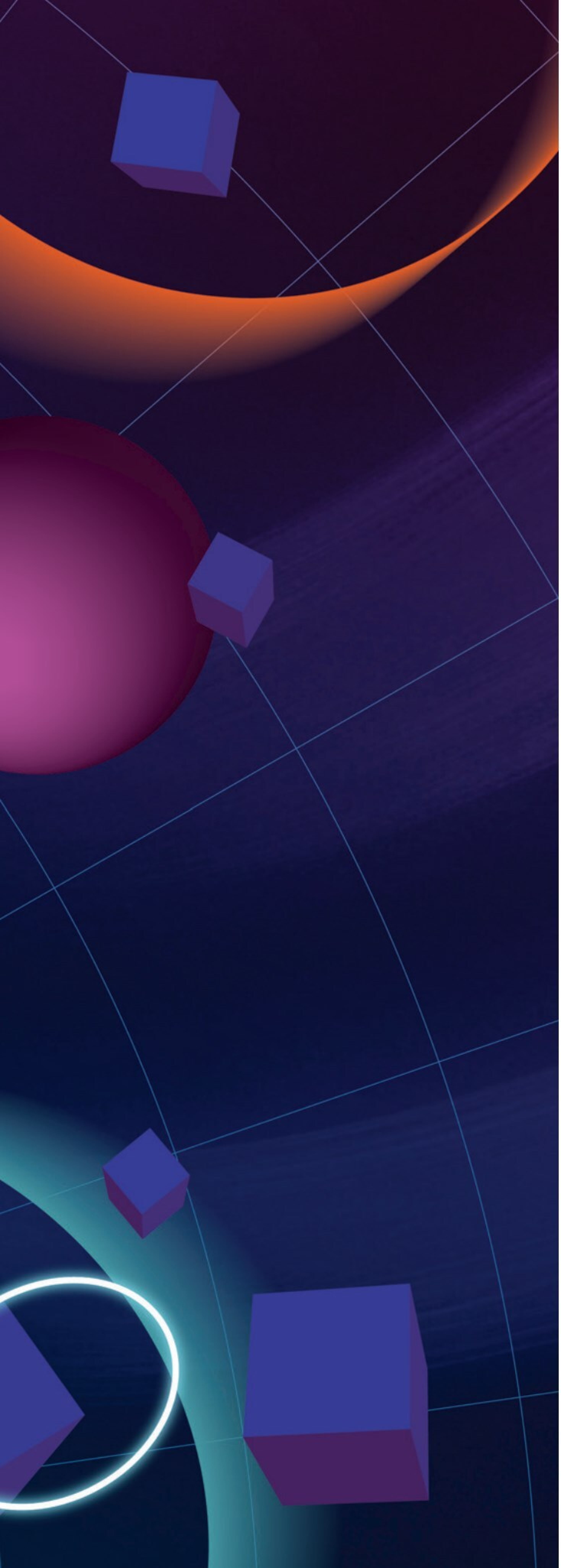
↘ **Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!**

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

Into the MULTIVERSE of the METAVERSE

Gaming and the metaverse are inextricably linked – for better or worse **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**





Depending on who you ask, the metaverse could be any number of things. For some, it's highly centralized around gaming, existing as an MMO-like experience. For others, it's a virtual workspace or a digital version of the world we already live in. The most commonly accepted version of the metaverse, though, is something that resembles *Ready Player One* where all of your favorite characters, friends, and family members interact with each other in a 3D virtual world. Or at least, that's the most idealized vision for what the metaverse could be.

Of course, that's not a reality at the moment and the closest something's come might be Epic's juggernaut free-to-play battle royale game, Fortnite. But long-running MMOs like CCP Games' EVE Online might be just as close to what the metaverse may become: a virtual world where players become entirely different people living completely different lives. They might be the commander of a space fleet igniting a war to colonize planets prime for resources, or they might be a simple trader on a peaceful planet.

For CCP CEO Hilmar Pétursson, conversations about the metaverse are nothing new. In conversation, you can sense the blasé outlook he has on the idea – not because he isn't interested in it, but because they are the same ideas he's heard shuffled in gaming circles since the 1992 release of *Snow Crash*, a foundational sci-fi novel that set a precedent (not necessarily the precedent) for what a metaverse could be, even going as far as to coin the word "metaverse."

"We basically had the whole concept of the [metaverse] in [*Snow Crash*]," Pétursson says. "It was the first wave of the metaverse hype, and there were plenty of companies doing this. What we were basically envisioning was to take the internet to 3D, the web being the 2D internet. Then we wanted to build the 3D internet in VR, and if you look at the latest kind of sparked dialogue around the word 'metaverse,' it is almost like nothing has changed."

Pétursson is alluding to an ongoing discourse that's been brewing for years, heightened when social media giant Facebook changed its name to Meta and highlighted a possible work-focused metaverse. Pétursson isn't interested in this concept. For him, the metaverse can be and should be so much more. *Game Informer* recently spoke to four different companies either developing metaverse games or developing game-related software. Despite different outlooks on the metaverse, there was one commonality: it's about agency.

←

illustration:
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Becoming Whoever Or Whatever You Want

Following the release of *Snow Crash*, the word "metaverse" was thrown around just as haphazardly as it is today. As it's defined in the novel, the Metaverse is a hyper-real digital world. So real that, for example, if your online avatar was hacked with a dangerous virus, you might experience actual brain damage. Companies like Makena Technologies and Immersion Corp. pitched their own ideas of that metaverse, with less brain damage, but technology in the '90s proved too primitive to bring it to life.

The idea subsided until innovations in the early 2000s, when games such as Second Life and PlayStation Home revitalized the discussion once again. By then, MMOs like World of Warcraft and EVE Online were in the hands of gamers and becoming more popular, and while metaverse discussion had calmed once more, the term "metaverse" could have easily been swapped with "MMO." Fast forward 19 years, and Pétursson is aware that the metaverse discussions of the '90s and then the 2000s are returning. And yet, he thinks we're still another 25 years off from the metaverse everyone pictures in their head.

While the term "metaverse" remains almost as nebulous as it has in years past, its potential to transform the world, or at least gaming, is evident.

"The idea of the metaverse is so attractive [because] it feels like something where you will have more agency, which is related to power," Pétursson says. "Why do people go and play games online? It's about the power fantasy. I cannot currently build a space empire [in real life]."

In EVE Online, though, he can and millions of players do because at the heart of the game is agency, the same agency that might prop up the metaverse one day. If you want to build a space empire in EVE Online, the skeleton needed to do that is there. If it doesn't interest you, there's plenty else you can do.

Job Simulator's virtual office, built as a game, looks somewhat similar to Meta's idea of a metaverse but is significantly more fun and appealing

However, discussions about the metaverse such as this carry with them a sense of irony. The metaverse is about agency and power fantasies, and doing what you didn't think possible. Because the metaverse isn't really a thing beyond a buzz word Silicon Valley especially loves right now, you can say "the metaverse is this" or "the metaverse is that" and you'd be right, because it's whatever you want it to be. Considering video games have been providing us the stories and gameplay of people we wish we were (or weren't) for decades, the idea of the metaverse as it's largely viewed today makes us ask: is the only difference between video games we all know and love and the metaverse a cheesy cyberpunk-esque headpiece that puts us into virtual reality? The more companies like Meta input into the discourse, the more it certainly seems that way.

Andrew Eiche, the COO of Owlchemy Labs, the studio behind VR titles like Job Simulator, has a view similar to Pétursson's assessment of agency and why the idea of the metaverse is not just recurring, but powerful.

"People want to feel connected, right?" Eiche says. "I think the pandemic has accelerated this in that we understand the stark limitations of video chat [better than ever]. FaceTime was good enough, but now that we've really had to rely on it, we understand that there has to be something better, and I think the metaverse is a place right now where ... we can find that connection."

But our grandmothers aren't going to log in to something like EVE Online to gain a better connection to us. They probably need a different kind of user interface to feel what EVE Online players feel when playing together – something that realizes Holotech Studios Inc. cofounder and CEO Dragos-Florin Stanculescu's view of the metaverse: life as we already know it, enhanced by new technologies.

Depending on who you ask, CCP Games' EVE Online could be seen as a metaverse and at the heart of that idea is the agency the game provides its players

Holotech's Animaze is an advanced overlay that people can use on video calls or streams. And these aren't just simple overlays – they blink, and track your eyes, facial movements, and arms too. Sure, there's an element of fun to it all, but at the heart of what Holotech is trying to do is a desire to help people be who they want to be.

"I think that being able to overcome your anxiety by becoming somebody else is really important [in this digital age] and having a tool that enables people to do that is really important," Stanculescu says. "There's also the more philosophical side of things: what's real and what's better than real? We crave hyper-reality. It's why we prefer things with a brighter color. That's why we prefer sweet things. That's why we are so easily hooked on unnatural beauty standards that you do in Photoshop. These super-normal stimuli actually work very well in our brains and hyper-reality plucks those strings."

The metaverse so often veers into hyper-reality territory as a result of that stimuli, Stanculescu says. Animaze is there to meet people where that hyper-reality clicks for them. If they're more comfortable as a dragon in the metaverse, Animaze wants to have an avatar overlay ready for them.

"For me, this is progress towards a better form of communication that we can't do in our human form," he says.

The possibilities for what one person needs to obtain that connection versus another person are theoretically endless, and Eiche believes that's why there are 50 different "metaverses" out there right now.

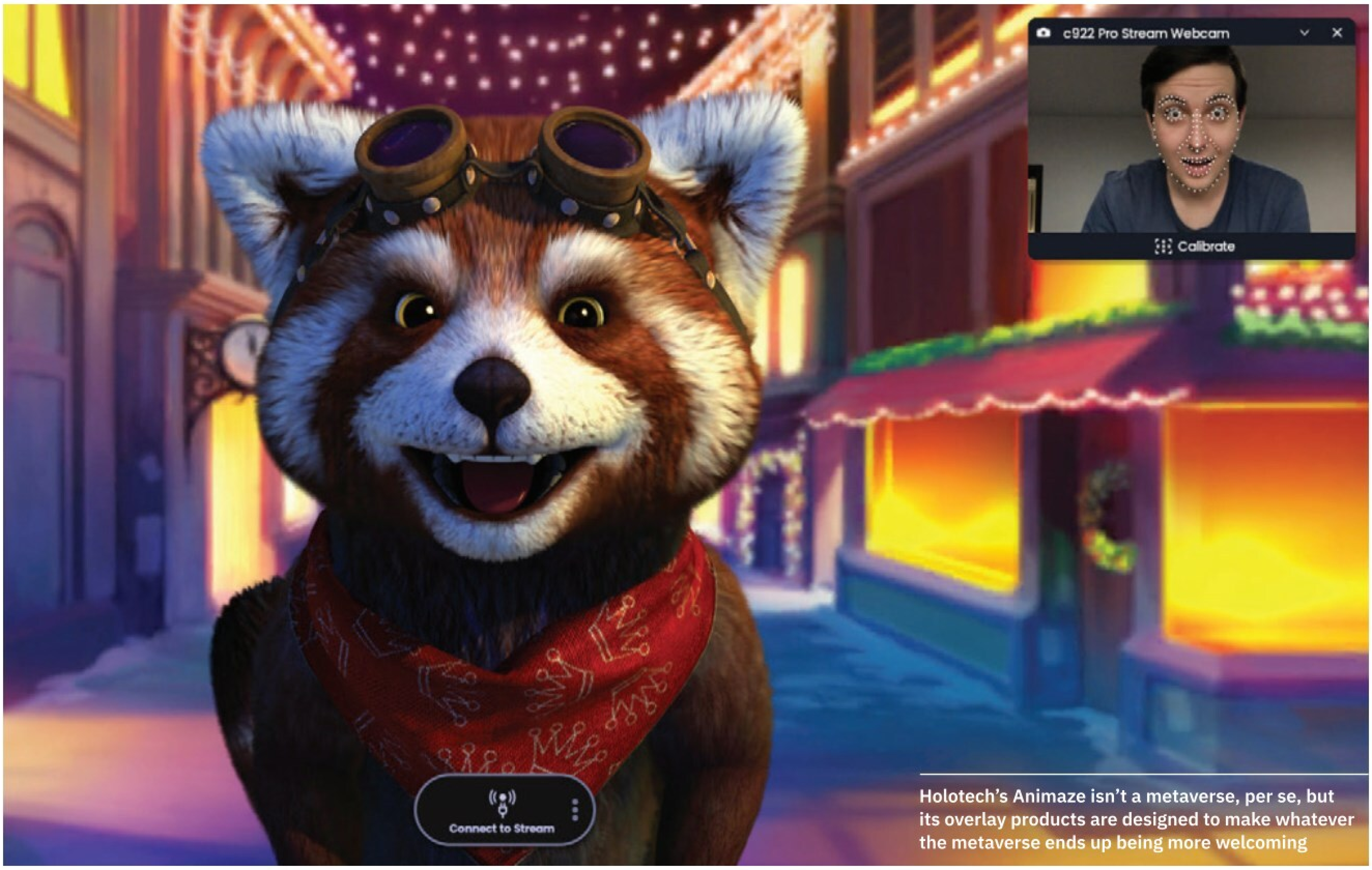
Whose Metaverse Is It Anyway?

Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer sees metaverses as varying from one person to the next, too, although he's not quite sure a metaverse is anything more than the virtual spaces we've been playing in for decades.

"I definitely see [the metaverse] as an extension of what gaming has been doing," Spencer told *The New York Times* in a recent interview. "I think as we look at the workplace going online [and] hybrid work environments, where we might have some of our coworkers together in one place [and] others that are on the other end of a call, we look at these virtual spaces and [apply] some of the things that we've learned in video games of people coming together ... to achieve tasks."

Spencer said that at Microsoft, the thinking on the metaverse is very much about taking what the company has already learned about online interaction and applying it to what the next evolution of, say, Microsoft Teams, might be. The Xbox head also believes that it's important to acknowledge that for many growing up today, video games are the place to seek and find social connection. Instead of playing on a playground after school, friends might meet up in an online game.

For the generation growing up with games, Spencer believes the metaverse will be a much easier concept to grasp. Take-Two Interactive CEO Strauss Zelnick would agree with Spencer's belief that video games already exist as metaverses.



Holotech's Animaze isn't a metaverse, per se, but its overlay products are designed to make whatever the metaverse ends up being more welcoming

"I would argue we're [Take-Two Interactive] probably the biggest metaverse company on Earth if you look in terms of revenue and profits because we're in Grand Theft Auto Online, which really, I think, defines the metaverse today," Zelnick told *CNBC* last November.

The Take-Two CEO is on board with video games existing as metaverses, but he's cautious of tech companies like Meta entering the space. He said he doesn't believe Meta's vision of the metaverse is what consumers want, adding that he's skeptical people want to conduct all of their usual daily tasks digitally.

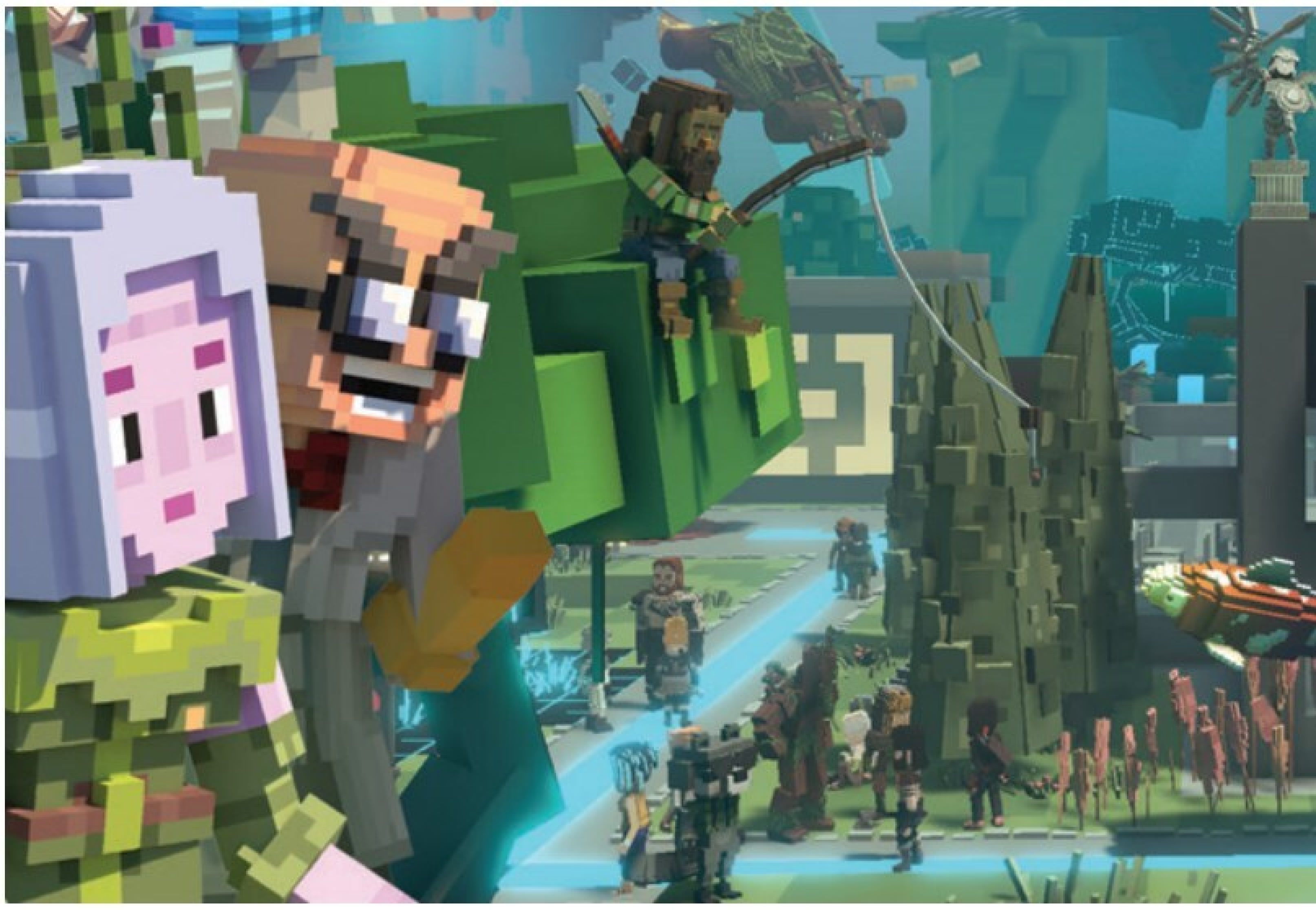
Zelnick joins many others in the tech industry who are wary of where metaverse discussions are going, especially regarding Meta's vision of it. Even PlayStation creator Ken Kutaragi can't get behind the idea of a metaverse as it's envisioned by many today.

"You would rather be a polished avatar instead of your real self?" Kutaragi recently told *Bloomberg*. "That's essentially no different from anonymous message board sites. Headsets would isolate you from the real world, and I can't agree with that. Headsets are simply annoying."

While Kutaragi finds headsets like PSVR or the Meta Quest 2 annoying, others find some of their favorite video game experiences in them, like Owlchemy's Job Simulator. But just because someone enjoys a few hours in a VR video game doesn't mean they're ready to strap on that same headset all day to complete tasks like, "take the virtual dog out for a walk," "grab virtual coffee at the virtual coffee shop down the virtual street," or even the ever-so-exciting "complete work in a virtual office that work says is better than your home office."

Instead, Eiche points to Roblox as an example of where the idea of a metaverse is today.

"When I look at the metaverse, I look at it as a set of different kinds of things and existences and environments, or at least places where you could live," Eiche says. "Fortnite is an example of a space with a lot of different things, and Roblox too. You can even start to map some of the parallels between [what's] real and Roblox. If you ask me, is [the metaverse] the office? Eventually, it will be, but the thing that you think will be the office is just not going to work out because you're starting by bounding yourself. You're building a literal cubicle with walls around what you can do."



Digital Real Estate

For Sandbox co-founder and COO Sebastien Borget, who runs PIXOWL INC, the metaverse is supposedly a sandbox where NFTs and blockchain-minted items can pass boundlessly from one thing to the next. The Sandbox is an MMO that readily uses the word "metaverse" to describe itself. It resembles Minecraft and The Touryst in graphics but is decidedly built around multiplayer interaction and relies heavily on the idea of NFTs and owning digital land, with receipts kept on the blockchain.

It's received millions in funding and has a sizeable player base, growing significantly in 2021 to reach more than 500,000. It has branding partners in Snoop Dogg, *The Walking Dead*, Atari, and over 100 more. Despite its lesser-known popularity in traditional gaming circles, it's a powerhouse in the world of NFT games.

Borget says The Sandbox is positioned as an open metaverse that enables users to "truly own" their digital assets and the creations they make.

"To us, the metaverse … is essentially a digital parallel universe where users, human beings, will be engaging with more social, more immersive experiences through an avatar or 3D character that will be a representation of itself," Borget says. "They will use that same avatar across multiple experiences, and to go a bit further, the metaverse is not a single company. In our opinion, it is not Meta. It's not Facebook. It's not Roblox. It's not Fortnite. It's a myriad of online virtual worlds. It's the plurality of them and this is the idea: users can transfer their identity, their digital assets, their virtual belongings, their currency … to different worlds."

As many have pointed out before, this doesn't consider developers, which are the most important aspect of this idea of the metaverse. In order for your favorite weapon skin from Valorant to work in Fortnite, as pushers of NFTs have envisioned, both Riot Games and Epic Games would need to communicate and work out the technicalities of bringing a skin designed for one game's weapon over to a completely different game. Not to mention, said skin would need to be turned into an NFT first, which is something it seems many developers would be opposed to doing on principle anyway. In short, this isn't a reality.

However, Borget believes The Sandbox is already on its way to doing that. And it is, but only within the confines of The Sandbox and cryptowallets.

PIXOWL INC. refers to The Sandbox as a metaverse and it's heavily reliant on the blockchain and non-fungible tokens

“How those [NFT] contents are then represented in any application … is up to a developer,” Borget says.

“Up to a developer” is key, though, and it's why the cross-platform nature of NFTs and blockchain gaming usually doesn't get far. It also prompts the question: what developers are willing, and have the time, to open up a game's walls to allow content from this game or that into it? That's a question The Sandbox and other companies diving into NFTs like EA, Ubisoft, Konami, and Square Enix will need to address. And then they'll need to answer the environmental aspect of NFTs and explain how their NFT moves aren't just a new form of microtransactions with a particularly sinister spin in the form of play-to-earn in some cases.

Despite Borget's positive outlook on this idea of the metaverse, there's the inherently negative aspect of all this. Blockchain games and NFTs have drawn heavy criticism in the industry thus far due to their part in ongoing environmental damage. Plus, many view NFTs as scams, or at least scam-like in nature.

PIXOWL released a 2021 blog post last July that said after switching to Polygon's Layer 2, the game was able to reduce its carbon footprint of NFTs by up to 99-percent. As many have pointed out before, if a carbon footprint was already 200 times greater than what we as a society already create, decreasing said footprint by 100-fold doesn't necessarily mean it's good for the Earth – it's just not as bad for it as it used to be. And even if an NFT transaction is now green, there are still other concerns surrounding NFTs in general like true ownership, whether the content was stolen before it was minted, and more.

Eiche and many others are critical of the NFT-powered idea of the metaverse. There are two reasons why the metaverse persists decade after decade, according to Eiche, and the first is the idea of striving for a better connection. The second, though, is more cynical.

“It's an avenue for money, and it's the next big battleground for yours,” Eiche says. “A company might say, ‘Oh crap, we may not have won social media’ or maybe you are a company that did win social media [Facebook/Meta] and you're like, ‘Wow, we can't lose the next one,’ right? That's the cynical answer.”

Eiche homes in on something that every person *Game Informer* spoke to touched on: like it or hate it, the metaverse is going to happen. What it looks like is still unknown, and when it actually arrives is too, but as Pétursson points out, it's going to keep coming around.

And it's likely to have a different definition each time. Like in the '90s and the 2000s that preceded it, the metaverse grows in concept alongside the expansion of the internet and gaming as we know it. Before we could tangibly enter virtual reality worlds, the metaverse was all about VR. Now that VR is here, the metaverse needs to be more. Who's to say that when we finally achieve the metaverse the '90s always hypothesized that it won't just as quickly grow stale, leaving users wanting more, much in the same way MMOs, websites, and social media platforms do today? The metaverse is a destination many are after, but as it stands today, it's nothing more than an endless chase. Which company crosses the finish line first will depend on whose definition of the metaverse we, the eventual userbase, agree upon. ■

In The Sandbox, players can purchase virtual plots of land and freely sell them to other players using cryptocurrency

QUICK TAKE

I'm deeply suspicious of how gaming may be commodified to fit into emerging ideas of a shared metaverse. Most current conceptualizations feel driven by business needs rather than enrichment of the play experience, which is seldom a good thing for end-users. Plus, I'm perfectly fine with keeping my fictional universes blissfully partitioned.

- MATT MILLER

GOTTA RANK ’EM ALL

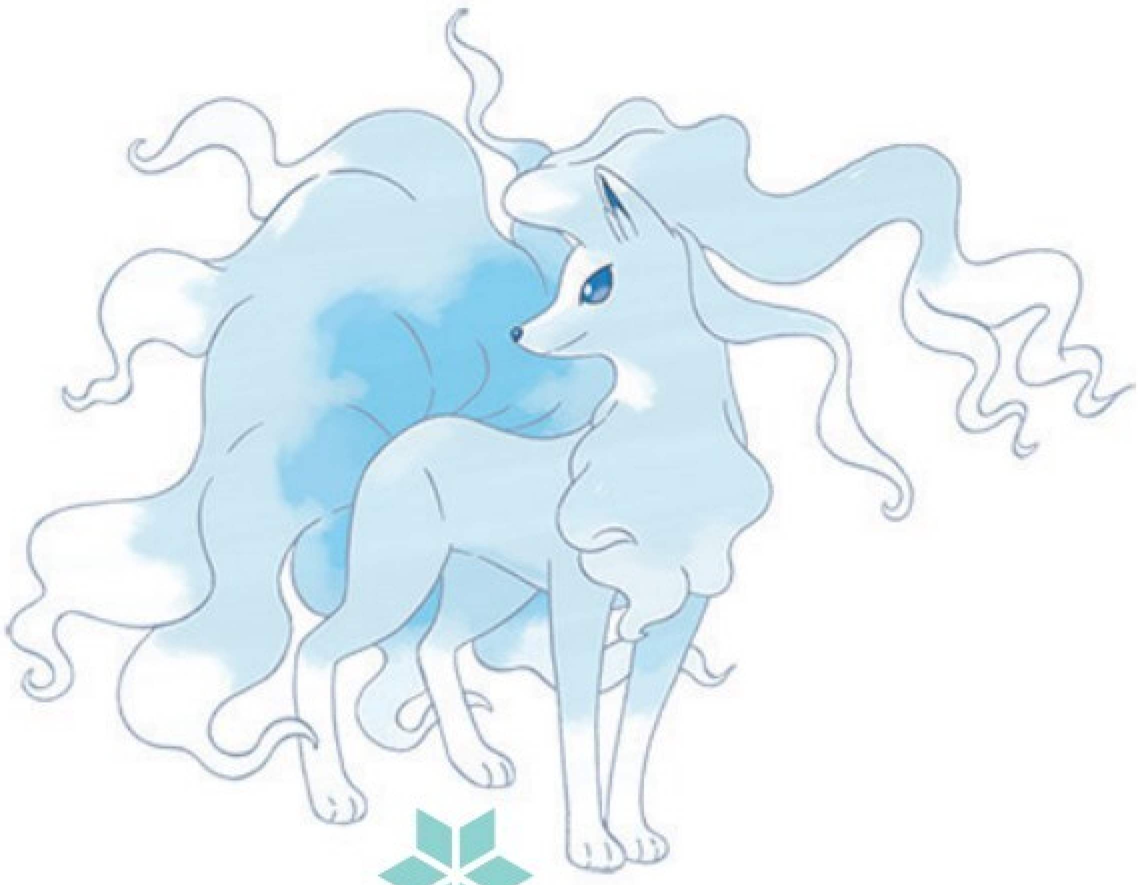
The best Pokémon of each type according to the *Game Informer* staff

BY JOHN CARSON

WITH THE ARRIVAL OF Pokémon Legends: Arceus and the recent emergence of regional forms, we now have over 900 Pokémon to catch, befriend, and train. But with that many creatures in the series, a question lingers: Which Pokémon is the best? While we could pour over plenty of numbers, stats, and official tournament results to decide which ‘mons come out on top, this question feels a lot less scientific to us and much more of a personal preference.

Every Pokémon fan has a favorite someone else wouldn’t even consider. With that in mind, *Game Informer*’s Pokémon fans gathered together to determine our collective favorite. Not limiting our selection to just one perfect monster, we elected our favorites from each of the 18 currently available types. After days of deliberation, we came to at least one conclusion on the matter: Many of our favorite Pokémon concepts were nailed by the games’ designers early on. But there are still plenty of great monsters from each generation, and we tried to represent that here.

Before you dive in, jot down your favorites for each type and see how they match up to ours. Your choices may be wildly different, and that’s okay and very much expected. It’s one of the reasons why Pokémon has endured for more than 25 years.

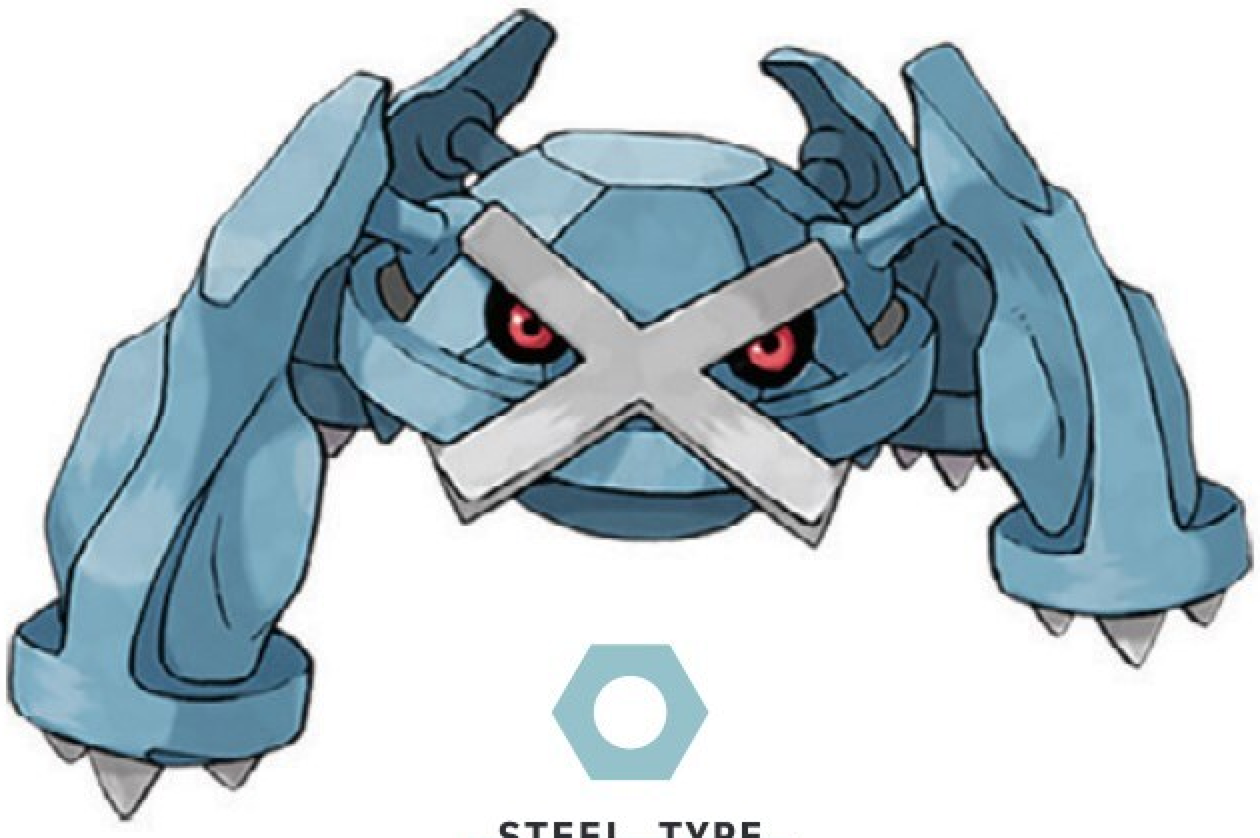


ICE TYPE

NINETALES

Alolan form

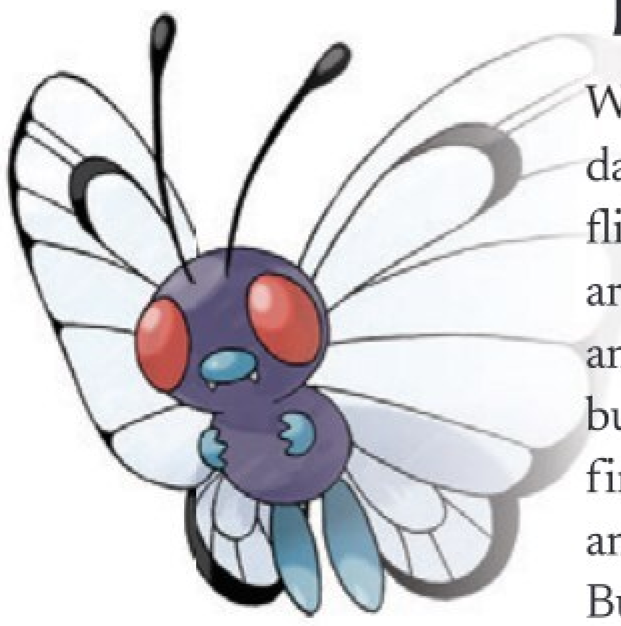
One of the more drastic changes for a regional form is Nintale’s elemental change from harnessing a burning inferno to embracing freezing ice. This snowy fox is one of the most elegant designs in Pokémon and brings a brisk, refreshing revision to one of our favorite members from the original 151.



STEEL TYPE

METAGROSS

First encountered in the Hoenn region, Metagross is a just fun Pokémon to think about. It’s built from two Metang that have fused, which in turn were each made from two fused Beldum. This Steel and Psychic wonder uses all four of those brains in tandem to determine the best strategy against opponents and uses its heavy magnetic metal frame to carry out the damage.



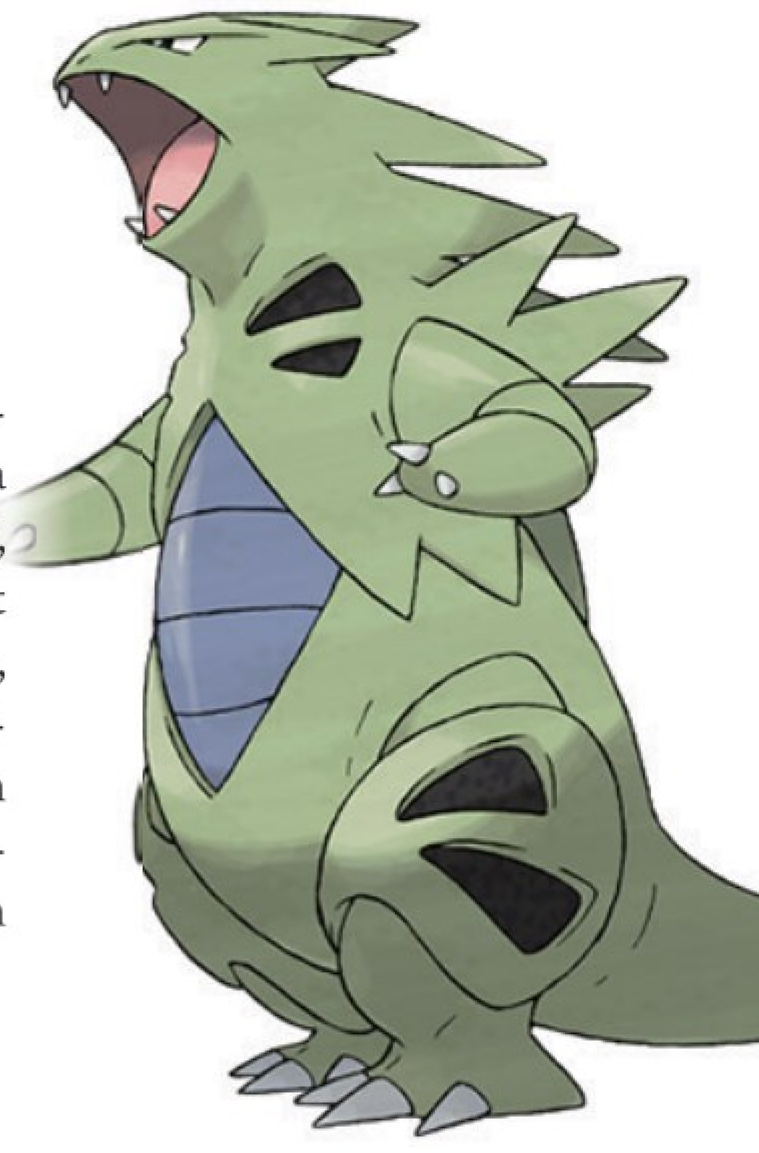
BUG TYPE

BUTTERFREE

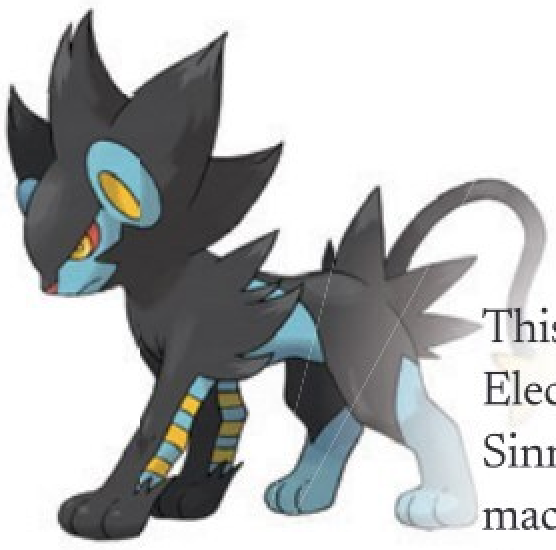
We've caught plenty of bugs in our day, but the true O.G., Butterfree, flies into our top slot here. Not only are its spore moves infinitely useful and dangerous in the right hands, but this adorable insect was our first fully-evolved Pokémon in Red and Blue. Our early adventures with Butterfree hold powerful memories, bolstered by its short stint on Ash's team in the anime that pulled at our young heartstrings.

ROCK TYPE

TYRANITAR



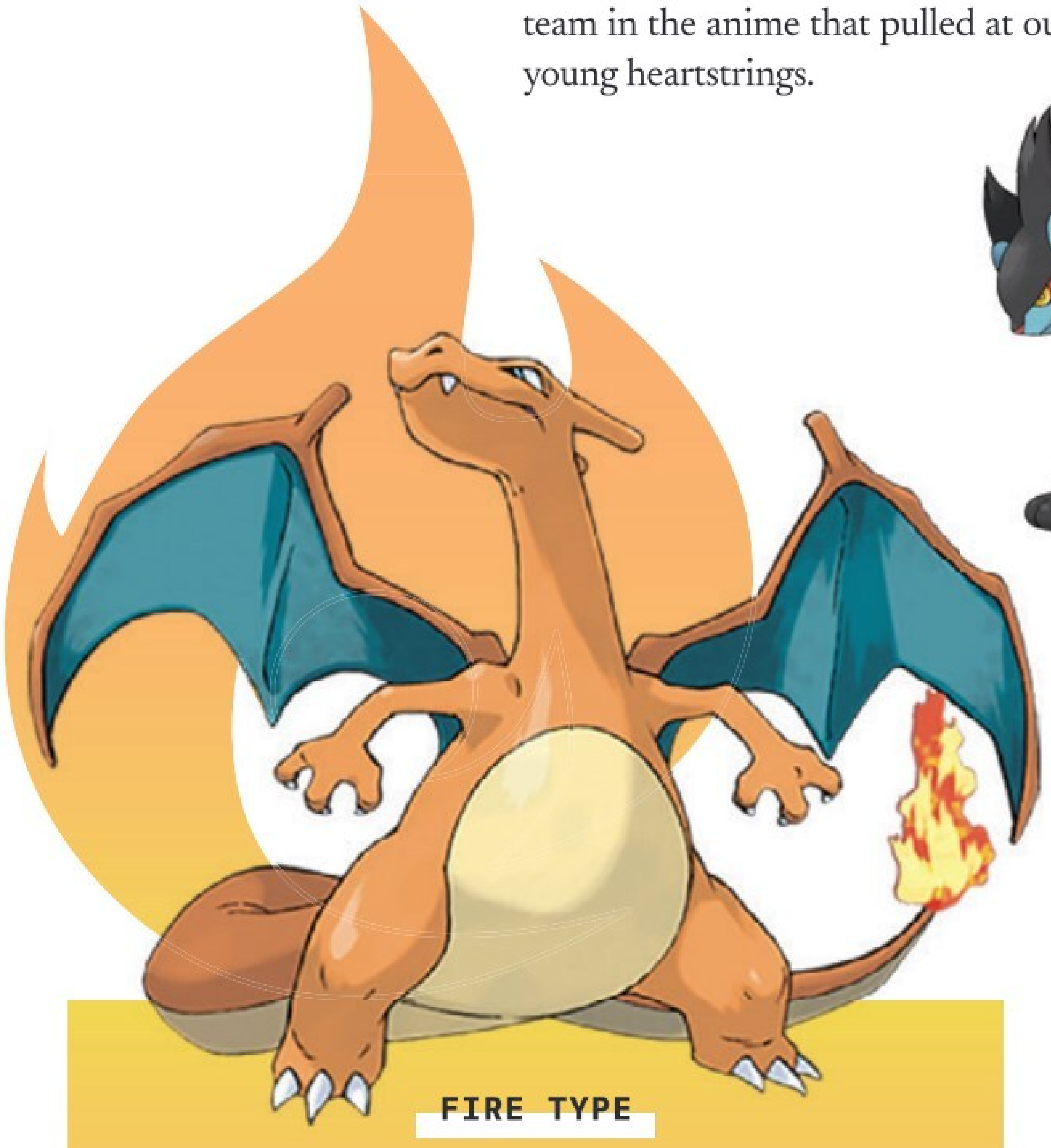
The primary Rock typing on this pseudo-legendary made a few on staff do a double-take, but when the dust settled, Tyranitar was the best choice for the spot on the list. Due to its nearly impervious, armor-like shell, attacks are mostly ineffective against it, and when it's thrown into a rampage, Tyranitar is known to destroy entire mountains. Don't mess with this rugged monster.



ELECTRIC TYPE

LUXRAY

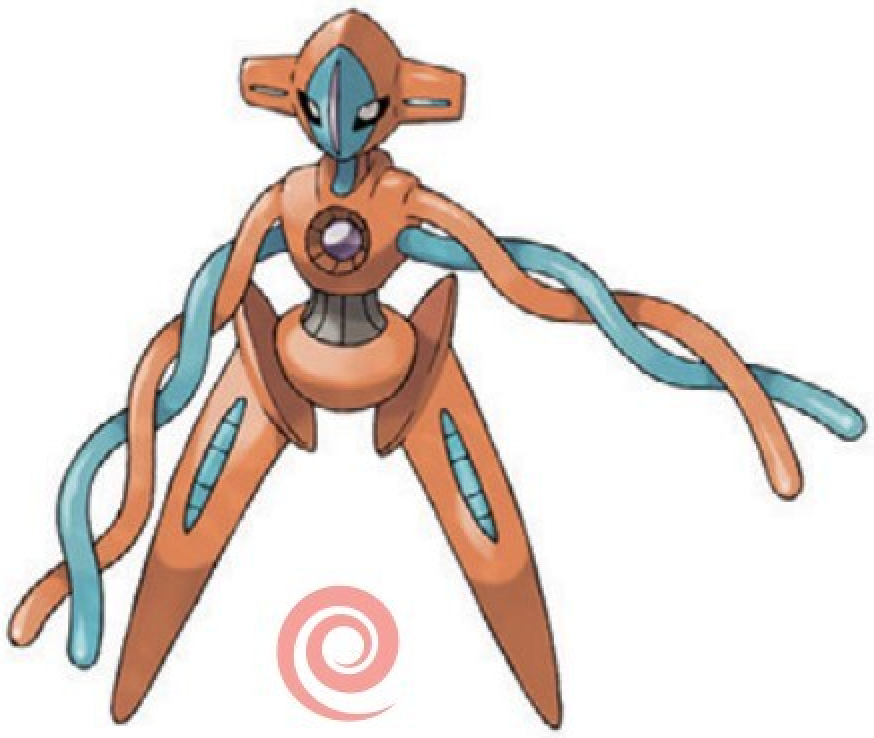
This lion-like dynamo shocked our shortlist of favorite Electric Pokémon after our recent adventures in the Sinnoh and Hissui regions. Its entire family line is immaculate as an evolutionary design, and Luxray is the electrifying crown on top. Luxray uniquely uses much of its voltage in its eyes, which allows a piercing stare that can see through solid objects.



FIRE TYPE

CHARIZARD

Only one true icon brings the heat every time we include it in our party. Charizard is one of the most exciting starter evolutions ever. It's a massive flying, fire-breathing dragon. What's not to love? Nostalgia plays a huge role in this pick, as Charizard hails from the original 151 monsters and is featured heavily in the animated TV series. The dragon's arc from being unwilling to help Ash to becoming a team player is an important and memorable part of the show. Game Freak even gave Charizard two awesome mega-evolutions, featuring it in some of the coolest and most valuable cards in the Trading Card Game. We're still not over Charizard and can't wait to see how and where it will appear next.



PSYCHIC TYPE

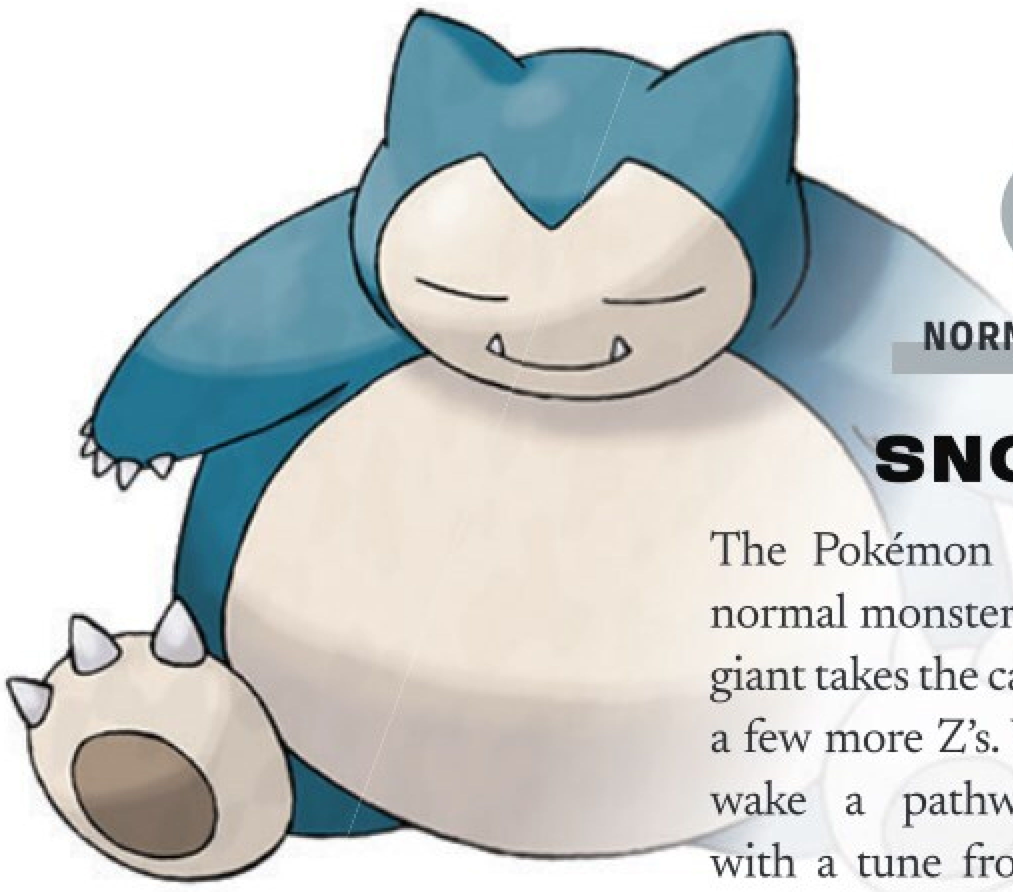
DEOXYS

What does it take to unseat Mewtwo from the top Psychic spot? For us, the transforming virus from space, Deoxys, rivals the Gen I legend. Deoxys' viral nature makes it incredibly adaptable and ready for almost any battle situation. Featuring four different forms (Attack, Speed, Defense, and Normal), Deoxys can be adapted to lend its immense psychic strength to just about any team.

QUICK TAKE

With Gen IX kicking off this year through the newly announced Pokémon Scarlet & Violet, we'll soon eclipse the 1,000 Pokémon mark. While I'll probably always favor Gen I creatures (give me Dragonite and Mewtwo any day of the week), Game Freak has done an amazing job of introducing new monsters while still finding ways to include everyone's older favorites.

- BRIAN SHEA



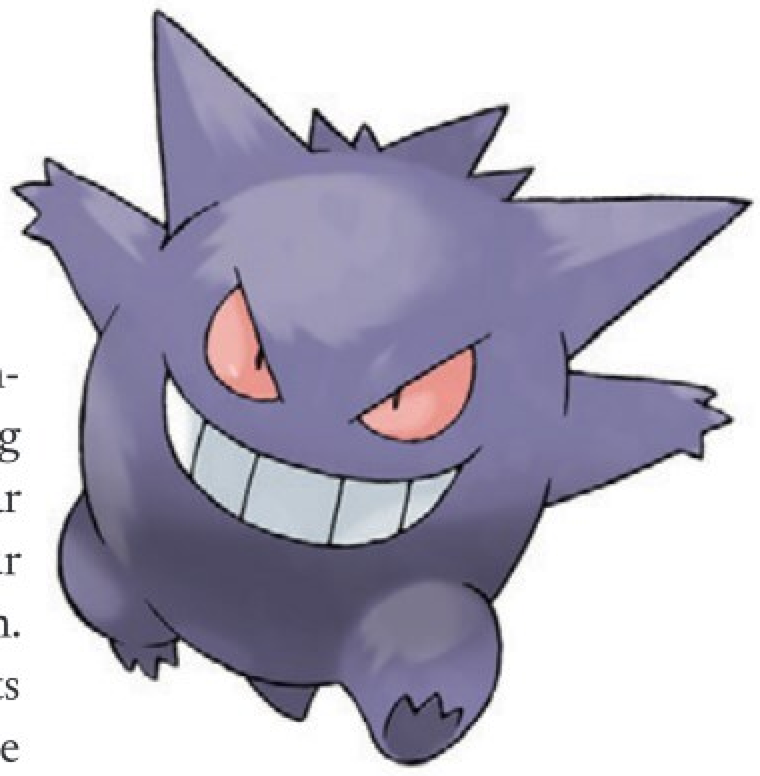
NORMAL TYPE

SNORLAX

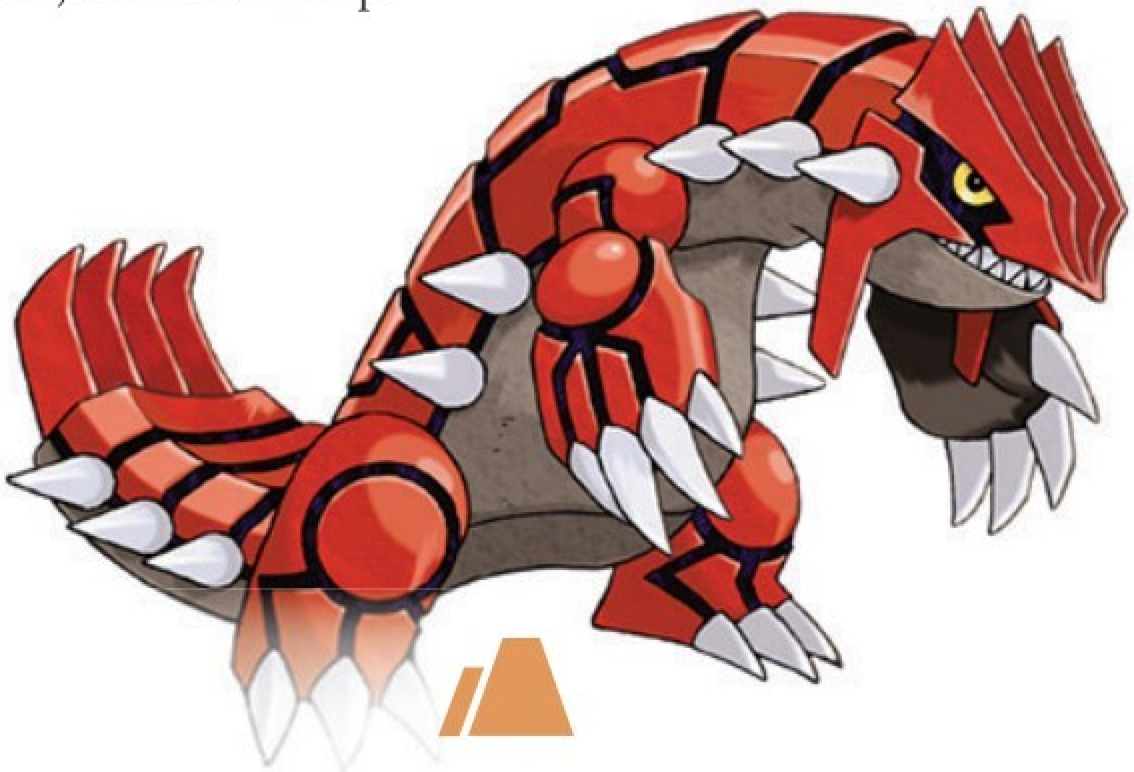
The Pokémon world has plenty of normal monsters, but one slumbering giant takes the cake ... and then catches a few more Z's. We're always giddy to wake a pathway-blocking Snorlax with a tune from the Pokéflute and catch it to add its tank-like battle prowess to our teams. It also doesn't hurt that it must be wonderful to snuggle up next to for a nice cozy nap.

GHOST TYPE

GENGAR



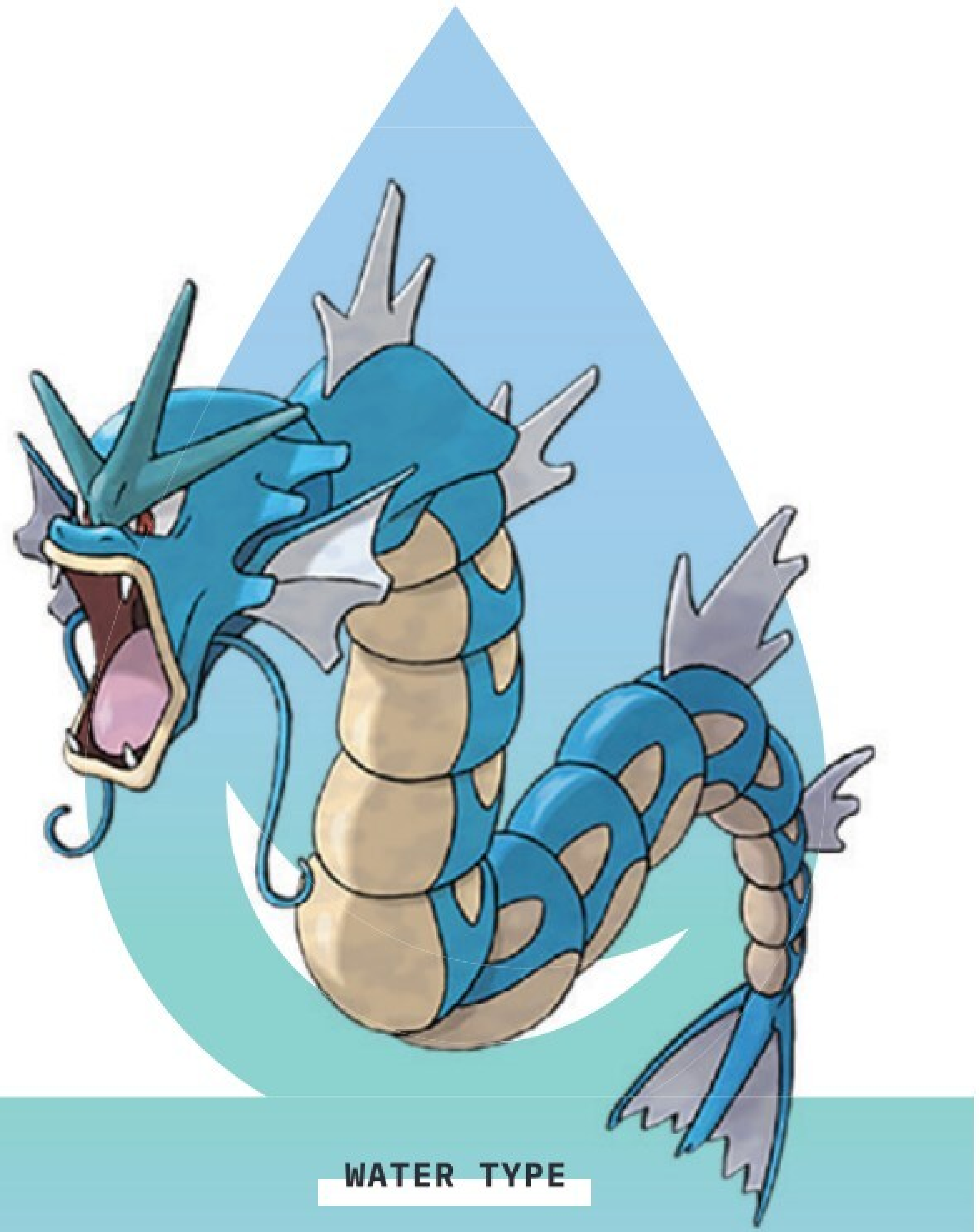
Hiding in shadows, haunting unsuspecting victims, and cursing whoever they come across, Gengar is an absolute nightmare and our pick for the best Ghost Pokémon. This first-generation monster eats dreams and scares children. Worse still, its mouth in Gigantamax form leads directly to the afterlife. Wow, that's messed up.



GROUND TYPE

GROUDON

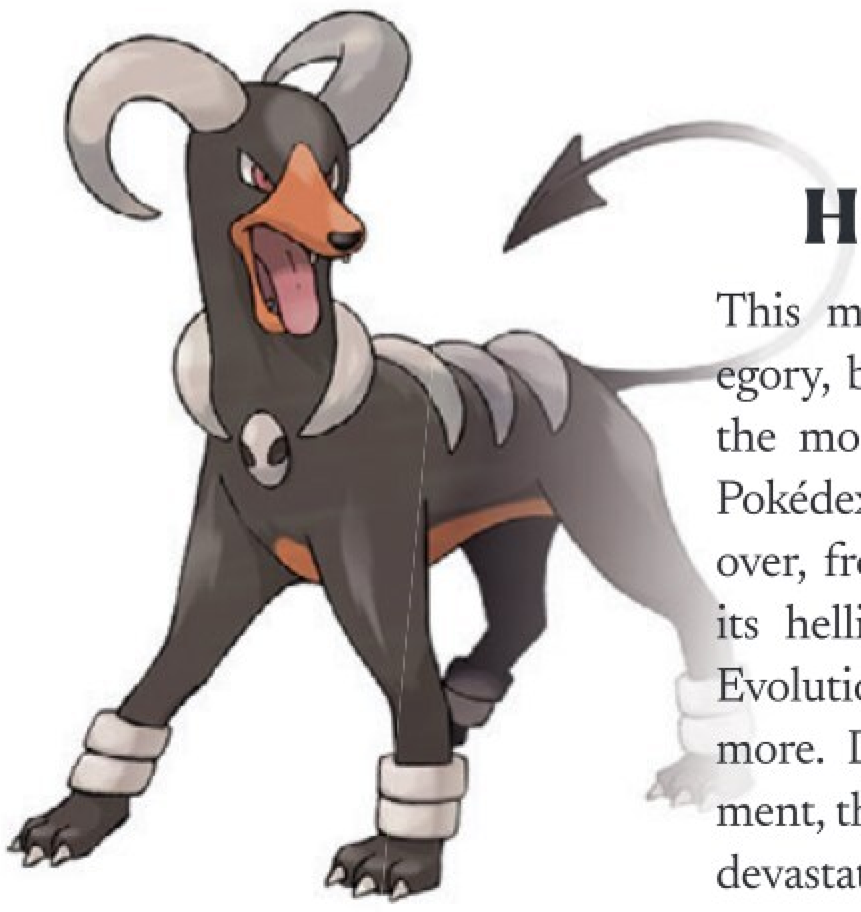
Headlining as the legendary monster from Pokémon Ruby, Groudon uses its mastery of molten fire and control of the earth to perform god-like feats. Its impressive power to create, shape, and move continents makes it a prime choice for the best Ground Pokémon.



WATER TYPE

GYARADOS

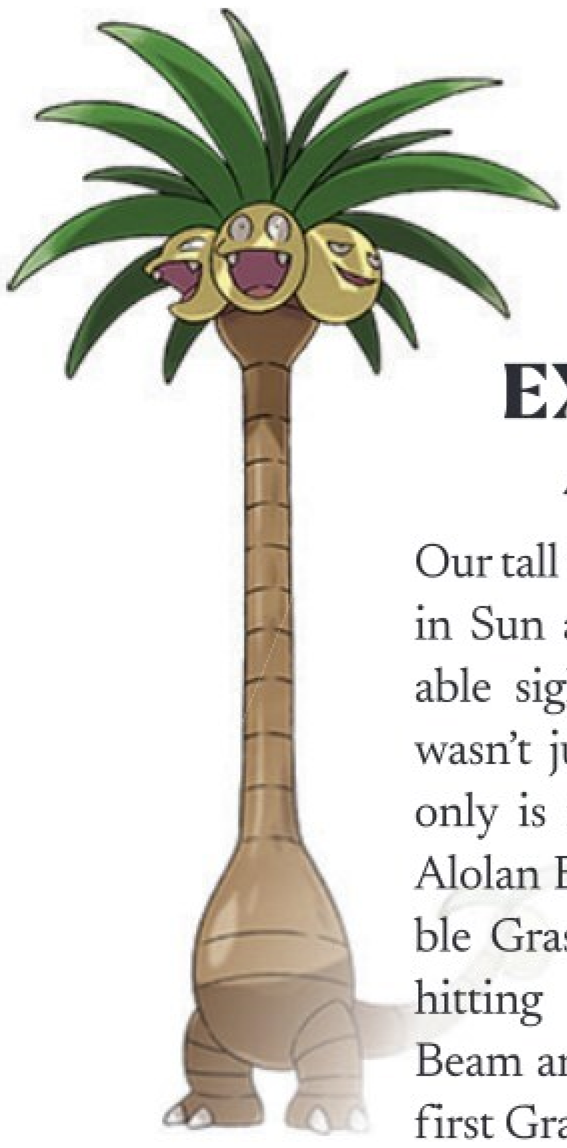
Few other Pokémon compete with the rags to riches story of Gyarados. In its pre-evolved form, Magikarp is good for the occasional Tackle but is otherwise uselessly splashing around. However, once you take it into a few battles, and it finally evolves, the fearsome and ferocious Gyarados becomes a stalwart ally and a powerhouse worthy of keeping on your team. Like Charizard, its faux draconic design enhances our love for this briny beast, and for many of us, the red Gyarados found in Gold and Silver's Lake of Rage was the first shiny Pokémon we ever caught. This revelatory event led us to seek out these rare color-shifted monsters for hours on end and for years to come.



DARK TYPE

HOUNDOOM

This may not be the Steel category, but Houndoom is possibly the most metal Pokémon in the Pokédex. It wears its darkness all over, from its bone-like armor to its hellish flames, and its Mega Evolution only accentuates this more. Due to its fiery temperament, this dog's bark can be just as devastating as its bite.

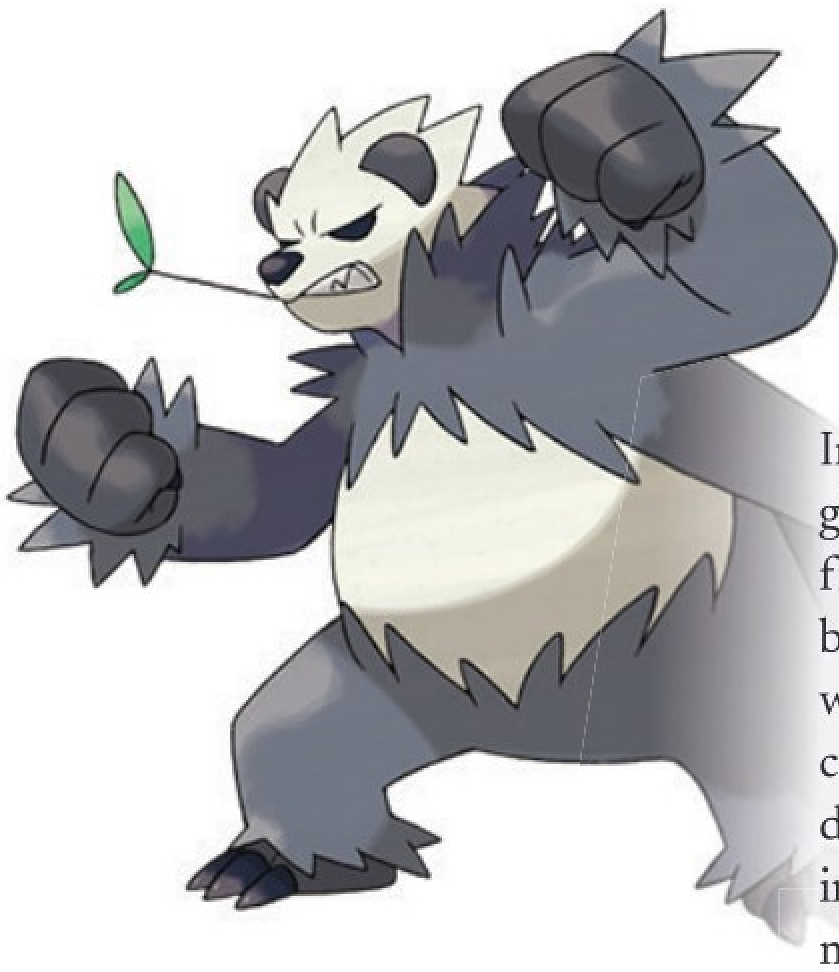


GRASS TYPE

EXEGGUTOR

Alolan form

Our tall tropical tree friend debuted in Sun and Moon with its memeable sight gags, but our fondness wasn't just a flash in the pan. Not only is it amusing to look at, but Alolan Exeggutor is also a formidable Grass-type armed with heavy-hitting classic attacks like Solar Beam and Giga Drain. Plus, it's the first Grass-type to be half-Dragon.



FIGHTING TYPE

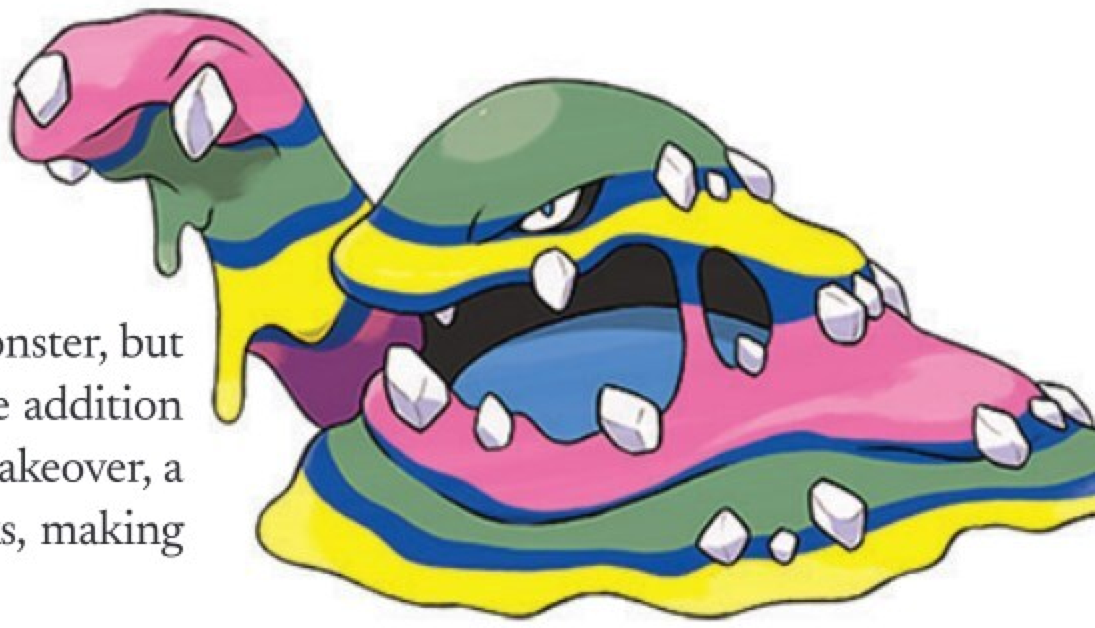
PANGORO

Introduced in Gen VI, Pangoro is a pugilist panda styled after a Japanese ruffian that's itching to start a fight. These big bears live to brawl and communicate with their fists, often leading to painful conversations for their trainers. Its gruff demeanor and intimidating stature may imply Pangoro would pick on helpless monsters, but instead, it hates bullies and doesn't stand for injustice.

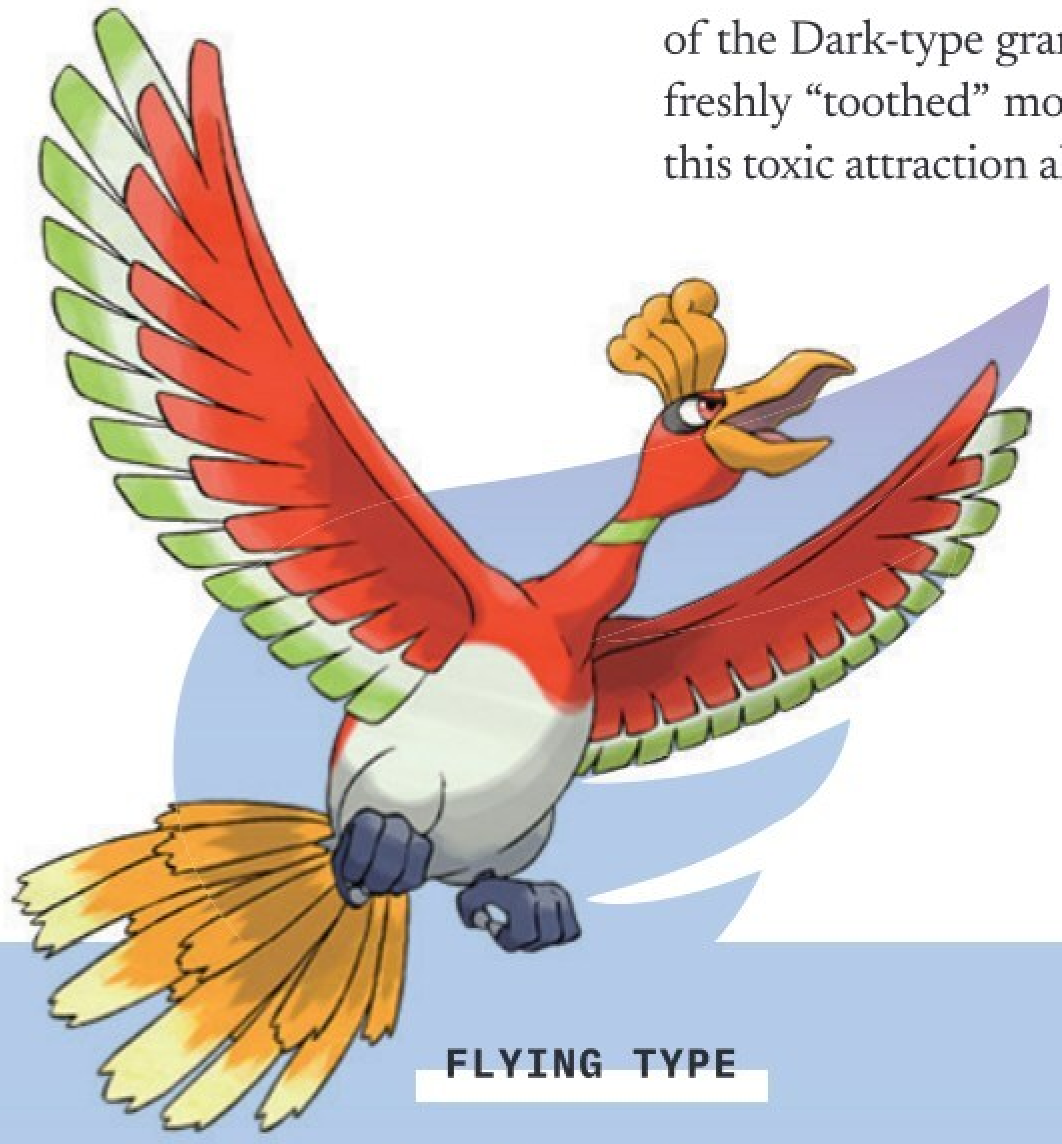
POISON TYPE

MUK

Alolan form



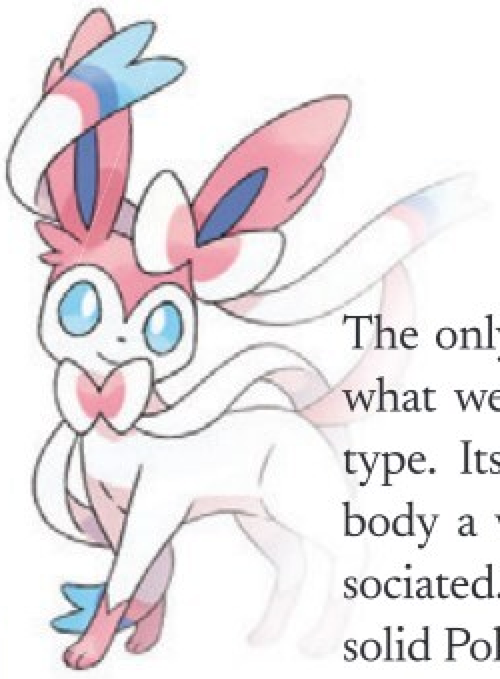
Standard Muk was already a shoo-in for the best Poison monster, but its Alolan form ultimately stands on top of the original. The addition of the Dark-type granted this pile of sludge a technicolor makeover, a freshly "toothed" mouth, and a set of dastardly dark attacks, making this toxic attraction all the more appealing.



FLYING TYPE

HO-OH

This shimmering, then-unnamed bird soaring over Ash's head during the first episode of the anime etched a glimmer of wonder within us. At the time, some of us knew the original 151 monsters like the back of our hand, but Ho-oh's brief appearance blew our minds, opening us up to the potential mysteries in the Pokémon world. It wouldn't be formally introduced until Gold and Silver, starring as the former's cover monster and one of the final challenging monsters to catch. This rainbow-colored phoenix has the power to raise the dead, a very impressive trick that further earns its coveted spot on our list.



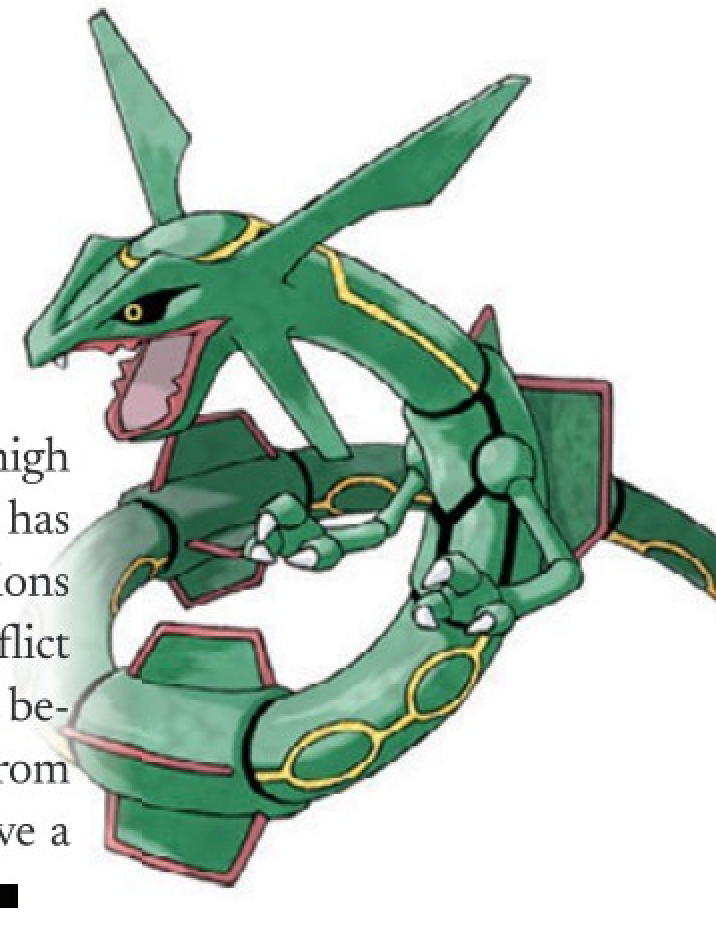
FAIRY TYPE

SYLVEON

The only Eeveelution to make our list, Sylveon is what we see as the poster monster for the Fairy type. Its pastel colors and flowing ribbons embody a whimsy with which the type is often associated. Being pure Fairy also makes Sylveon a solid Pokémon for your team, often being a foil for mighty Dragon, Fighting, or Dark monsters.

DRAGON TYPE

RAYQUAZA



An airborne serpentine dragon flies high above the pinnacle of its type. Rayquaza has lived in the planet's ozone layer for millions of years, protecting the Earth from conflict between the primal legendary creatures below and dangerous threats like Deoxys from the vast space above. Few Pokémon have a background more legendary than that. ■

LAST
GAMER
STANDING

TONY VAZQUEZ

FOR THE WIN

BY ANNE-MARIE PRITCHETT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE LAUS

Seven weeks. Thousands of competitors worldwide. The ultimate battle to see who would take home $25,000 and the title of Last Gamer Standing. Introducing the four finalists who powered through level after level to endure the gamer gauntlet.

AND THE LAST GAMER STANDING IS …

Gigawatts Lounge, DeLand, FL

Tony Vazquez—a quick-witted, charismatic New Yorker who migrated to Florida and now owns a retro arcade bar called Gigawatts. Vazquez is a young Navy veteran who spent some memorable time in Japan, which further fueled his fondness for gaming. “I grew up in old arcades and then Japan, so I fused the two together to form Gigawatts,” he said. The arcade is home to over a hundred retro stand-up and sit-down machines and new games on the bar, which are all switched out periodically.

While at the top of his game now, this business venture has had its challenges. Vazquez is a success story. Two weeks after he got the keys, the state shut down due to the pandemic, “I couldn’t open for six months, meaning, I couldn’t get a health or fire inspection, but I had to pay for utilities. I couldn’t get anything done,” he said.

Now, Vazquez and his business partner Angel have not only survived the obstacles thrown at them, but they are living their best lives. With the help of his crew, he took home the loot in the LGS Competition, which is yet another launch pad for an even brighter future. One of the most important aspects of this journey was the Competition’s donation to Starlight Children’s Foundation. “It was a blessing and the consequence of what we did. That’s good chromatic karma—loads of layers, loads of colors. People would say, ‘What if you don’t win?’ To me, the intention is still there; the vibration has been sent; the universe has recognized it. It’s the ‘Secret.’”

GIGAWATTS RETRO ARCADE LOUNGE

One gigawatt = One billion watts. A lightning strike can produce 1.21 gigawatts of power. It seems fitting that Vazquez named his Japanese-inspired arcade Gigawatts Lounge, considering the intense energy that he and his team have put in since opening its doors. Vazquez himself is an electric force not to be reckoned with. While he is all positivity, he does not have time for BS. He works hard to make his dream a reality, and it has not been an easy ride.

Located at **112 West Indiana Avenue in DeLand, Florida**, Gigawatts Lounge is not only an arcade but a hub for up-and-coming streamers to get their live streams up on the big screen. Vazquez proudly promotes gamers such as “the beautiful but deadly Apex legend ‘Scariely,’ and the hilarious game developer and publisher ‘Thor.’ We have amazing artwork from the Lord of the Robots ‘Yamamani,’ and incredible streams from Marvel’s sweetheart ‘VanityDiaz.’ Get late-night chat vibes with ‘Sierrenity,’ or get laughs and lots of mistakes from ‘GameswithJJJ,’ or network with grad-film buddy ‘Demigod2025.’

Gigawatts also debuts local music artists such as Mr. Protege (Motivation, Dedication), Wikidill (Zombiebooze 2022), and the Puerto Rican sensation YadiYo (Pound for Pound),” he said.

“In association with Grand Champ Entertainment, our focus is music, but we also help entrepreneurs fund their dream business. We want to show them another way is possible—another world is possible. The choice is yours,” said an enthusiastic Vazquez about the arcade’s other offerings. “We are also proud sponsors of ‘Pro Wrestling Action,’ the best indie wrestling show in Florida.

“My personal goal as Owner of Gigawatts is to get sponsored by Bandai Namco and get some exclusive Japanese arcade games in here, you know, bring the Japanese vibe to Gigawatts.”

Prowrestlingaction.com
Facebook: gigawattsllc

starlight™

Last Gamer Standing is proud to partner with Starlight Children’s Foundation, a 501(c)3 organization that delivers happiness to children in hospitals and their families. Since 1982, Starlight’s groundbreaking and innovative programs have impacted 17 million kids at more than 800 children’s hospitals across the United States. Starlight Gaming and Starlight Virtual Reality programs transform the hospital experience of young patients by providing play and distraction to help them relax and heal during difficult medical procedures.

Last Gamer Standing, LLC will donate a portion of the net proceeds from this year’s Competition to the Starlight Children’s Foundation. To learn more about how Starlight delivers happiness to seriously ill kids, visit www.starlight.org.

GOOD GAME

LAST GAMER STANDING RUNNERS-UP

2ND PLACE LELA MCNEIL

(ANGELIC LELA)

Introducing the Goddess of Duality, the Oracle of Harmony — Angelic Lela, a Dallas/Ft. Worth-based streamer who aims to raise mental health awareness and help women have a better, safer space in the community. Lela McNeil took second place in the Last Gamer Standing Competition thanks to a legion of supportive family, friends, and fans. She is a trailblazer who leads the Parthenon of Gamers (a collective that runs tournaments in the DFW area), is an ambassador for the Game HERS, and is a beloved member of the Athena Alliance. “I am also heavily affiliated with the Naruto to Boruto: Shinobi Striker community with my Clan NW (Ninja Way), and I’m the Fire Kage for a new way to play Shinobi Striker called Elemental War on Twitch. I hope to partner with Bandai Namco. I play a lot of their fighting games, as well as Digimon,” she said.

McNeil is big on uplifting and supporting one another and uses her gaming platform to bring people together in a positive way. Her viewers get affirmations for subscribing, she raises money by doing 24-hour charity streams, and she promotes the National Suicide Awareness Lifeline. It’s no surprise that her favorite game is George Batchelor’s Far from Noise. “I like it because it practices meditation and mindfulness in an interactive and concealed way,” she said. And, her favorite character is Talim from Soulcalibur. “Talim’s innocence and selfless character resonates with me. She is also confirmed to represent the Asian community. I am African American and Filipino myself.”

McNeil is an indy player who does reviews on Dare Drop to help creators and indy publishers. She was destined to become a gamer following in her mom’s footsteps. “Gaming is very nostalgic for me.” Now, her 8-year-old daughter continues the family tradition. McNeil’s advice for newbie streamers is, “Have fun playing, and always be true to yourself; your people will show up.”

Twitch: angelic_lela | Insta: @angeliclela

3RD PLACE MALCOLM MUHAMMAD

Atlanta native and Southern gentleman Malcolm Muhammad is a streamer with a slick clothing line called PYOG (Put You On Game). Born in ‘94, Muhammad is a Millennial/Digital Native who grew up playing Legend of Zelda and first-person shooters like GoldenEye 007, Doom, and Duke Nukem. Today, he is on Team Xbox, and his game of choice is Skyrim due to the endless possibilities wrapped up in the game. “It’s a different play-through every time,” he said. Muhammad is an authentic, confident guy with a sensitive side too. “Titanfall 2 emotionally touched me. I definitely shed a tear,” he said. Regarding the LGS Competition, “I appreciate YT and my gaming crew so much. The win was a group effort.” He also calls out Mathew Lentz for being the only fellow competitor who wished him luck. When not gaming, Muhammad likes to cook, work on art for his brand, do backflips in random places, and play with his Mastiff, Kutcher.

twitch.tv/shmokingonexotic
Instagram:pyog420
Twitter:bankheadounce

4TH PLACE STEVEN MICHAEL HLAVAC JR.

(JOE BLACK)

Rounding out the Last Gamer Standing Competition is a passionate journalist, podcast host, and entrepreneur who is on a mission to spread positivity in the gaming industry. “You are only as good as your word and how you treat others. Even in online environments, it is important to show and spread love,” said Steven Hlavac, CEO of Safest Games, a boutique journalism outlet for the sophisticated player. “People work hard on their games, and we prefer to focus on games with potential to engage with you that may be overlooked in other outlets.” Hlavac appreciates games with educational value. “I love 4X games — because I’m always learning. Sid Meier’s Civilization is the pinnacle of them. Meier is a genius.” Hlavac lives in Grand Junction, CO, with his black lab Nero. He would like to thank Andres Diz, Jasmine Beveridge, his family, and all the other supporters who showed him loyalty throughout the Competition.

https://safest.games/

SILVERHAN
CHIPPIN'
EUROPYNE

TOP FIVE

LET'S ROCK!

The best in-universe bands to record real music

BY BRIAN SHEA

1 By virtue of being fronted by Johnny Silverhand, **Samurai** was already high up on the "cool" scale. However, by bringing in legendary hardcore punk band Refused to record six tracks as the band, CD Projekt Red took Cyberpunk 2077's music to the next level.

2 The Splatoon universe is full of in-universe bands like Off The Hook and The Chirpy Chips, but **Squid Squad** might be the most iconic of the bunch. Known for providing much of the multiplayer music in the first game, the band unfortunately broke up by the time Splatoon 2 came out.

3 In Eidos-Montréal's version of Guardians of the Galaxy, the group's fearless leader gets his name from an '80s metal band called **Star-Lord**. It might have been enough for the developer just to name-drop them, but instead, the team included a 10-song album by Star-Lord, performed by Eidos senior audio director Steve Szczepkowski and friend Yohann Boudreault.

4 The iconic singer-songwriter from the Animal Crossing series is much more than a background player. **K.K. Slider** gives players songs to enjoy in their homes, holds performances in towns, appears as a Mii costume in the Smash Bros. series, and even has an Amiibo figure dedicated to him.

5 Making its first appearance in Grand Theft Auto Vice City, the fictional Scottish rock band **Love Fist** has either appeared or been mentioned in every subsequent mainline game, including GTA Online. However, Vice City remains the band's most prominent showing, featuring several Love Fist songs on the radio. ■

HARDWARE REVIEW

STEAM DECK

Valve's portable PC hits its mark, even with drawbacks

BY MATT MILLER

VALVE'S LONG-AWAITED Steam Deck is finally here, offering up a portable gaming solution with broad appeal. The nature of that appeal is quite different depending on your perspective. Some primarily console-focused gamers may find a low-cost entry into at least part of the PC gaming experience. For more dedicated PC players, it provides a chance to take what may already be an extensive Steam library on the go – albeit with only specific titles optimized right now. Either way, the Steam Deck is an impressive first step into a promising future of portable PC play – with some significant issues holding it back from greatness.

The Steam Deck is big. At nearly a foot in width and weighing in at about 1.5 pounds, it's a bit surprising the first time you pick it up – even knowing ahead of time about its bulk. However, the advantages of that heft are immediately apparent, with spacious controls, a myriad of inputs, and most importantly, an impressive 7-inch display.

The LCD screen is touch-sensitive, primarily for navigating the user interface, and the 1280x800 visuals are more than enough to make games like Deathloop and Horizon Zero Dawn pop. And while most will likely plug in a headset or connect a compatible Bluetooth option, I was pleasantly surprised by the onboard stereo speakers, which offer crisp percussive sound, even at limited volume.

While heavy, the unit feels good in the hand, with a pleasing round curve beneath the palms that is more like a PlayStation controller than the flat Switch handholds against which it's most likely to be compared. The thumbsticks are snappy and textured, though even larger hands will feel their placement is a bit too high for a completely relaxing at-rest position. That's due to the location of the two touchpads just below. Those feature a satisfying haptic response I enjoyed. The touchpad is functional for the games that need it in play, but I had trouble getting anywhere near the precision I'd expect from an actual mouse.

The custom version of Steam runs admirably, whether navigating the store or chatting with your friends. I especially appreciated the quick access button functionality, which let me adjust brightness and audio settings and get performance overlay options that helped tweak my tech settings on the fly.

Valve has been improving performance and firmware right up to release, so the device is likely to continue to change in the weeks after. Nonetheless, compatibility at launch isn't guaranteed. Many Steam games run well with little compromise, but others have notable caveats, from display problems to tiny in-game text. Even so, it's remarkable to see games like God of War and Dark Souls III running smoothly. In testing across dozens of games, many ran well, and with settings you'd expect in a proper mid-range rig.

Battery life is a significant problem. Uncapping the framerate, turning up brightness or volume, or otherwise taxing the system moves it into the space of fewer than two hours of playtime. You can boost it significantly if you turn settings down. At PC game install sizes, you should also expect to fill up the hard drive pretty quick, even if you opted for one of the two larger-size SKUs. Thankfully, I had good luck running games off a micro-SD card for a ton of extra storage. I'm also bummed about the absence of an ethernet port for quicker download speeds, but a sold-separately USB-C hub fixes that.

Like any gaming PC, the Steam Deck is a complex beast, and many features will likely change in the coming months. But as Valve's foray into the handheld market, it offers access to a wealth of portable games on the go that you'll never get on a mobile phone or even on your Switch. And for many, that should be reason enough to overlook any failings, even if it's never going to fit in your back pocket. ■

GRADE: B-

The Steam Deck is an impressive piece of tech, offering solid gaming performance for a growing library of Steam titles, with an impressive display and user experience. Punishingly low battery life, minor ergonomic issues, and dicey compatibility with many Steam games give pause, but Valve's experiment transports many games into the portable realm with laudable success.

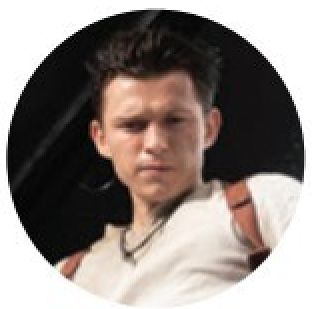
$399 (64 GB), $529 (256 GB), $649 (512 GB) | ***steamdeck.com***

Becoming Nathan Drake

We talk with actor Tom Holland about stepping into the live-action role of PlayStation's iconic explorer **BY BRIAN SHEA**

WHEN TOM HOLLAND arrived on set to shoot *Spider-Man: Homecoming* in 2016, his first leading role in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, he was excited that one benefit of working with Sony Pictures was the company outfitted his trailer with a PlayStation 4. One game included was Naughty Dog's then-latest effort, Uncharted 4: A Thief's End.

In his downtime on set, Holland played through the game with his friends. He fell in love with the series through that fourth entry, then went back and bought the older games to get caught up. Following early success with his Spider-Man films, Sony pitched Holland on a Nathan Drake origin story movie, to which Holland enthusiastically agreed.



TOM HOLLAND
Star of *Uncharted* and *Spider-Man*

As Holland prepared for the role, he homed in on a few character traits from the games that were most important in his translation of Drake to live-action. "I think his giddy optimism, I think his ability to see light in any situation, his sense of adventure, and his good heart were things that were very important to me when bringing this character to life," he says.

When most people think of Nathan Drake, they hear the Nolan North portrayal of the games. When North visited the Uncharted set, the longtime voice actor praised Holland's performance. "He was supportive, and for me, that's all I needed from him really," Holland says. "He has given me so much from playing the games – watching him and listening to his voice and his cadence."

In Holland's previous film, 2021's *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, he borrowed a move he saw while playing Insomniac's Spider-Man games. While Holland didn't directly lift any specific moves from the digital version of Drake, the team was inspired heavily by the iconic cargo plane action set piece from Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception, which is recreated nearly one-to-one in the film.

Despite going back and playing all the Uncharted games, Holland's first brush with the franchise, Uncharted 4, remains his favorite and most influential. "It's the most like our film," he says. "It's so cinematic. The story is so compelling, and it's what inspired this film."

While Spider-Man is certainly bigger than just the Insomniac franchise, Holland now portrays the live-action versions of two of PlayStation's most iconic characters. When asked about what this means to him, a smile comes across his face. "It's a huge honor," he says. "As a kid, I was an avid gamer. I've been a fan of both these games, and it's been a lot of fun playing them and then adapting them into films. I'm really grateful for the opportunity that Sony has given me, and it's been a wonderful adventure so far." ■

GEAR

THE 2022 SPRING BUYING GUIDE

BY MATT MILLER

After a long winter, you're ready for something fun to brighten your days. Or perhaps you've got a big birthday or gift-giving occasion on the horizon? Whatever your reasons, we've got a curated selection of tech, toys, tabletop games, and more, all selected to showcase some of the recent releases we're most excited to see hit store shelves.

Disclaimer: *Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop*

HOME

❶ PRISM 4-PANEL LED ART PANEL STARTER KIT

Awesome lighting can transform a space. These modular panels attach to the wall in any configuration you can imagine. They feature full RGB color customization, including multi-color and multi-zone mixes and full dimmable options, tweakable with either the included controller, via an app, or even over your smart speaker.

$99 | *monsterilluminessence.com*

❷ EVO IRM-1 TOOTHBRUSH

High-end sonic toothbrushes are going to cost you a pretty penny, so why not nod to your love of Marvel's Iron Man when you go for the upgrade? The IRM-1 features a sophisticated multi-mode cleaning engine to keep your smile looking fresh. And the way it lights up like it's powered by an arc reactor will have you flashing those pearly whites.

$199 | *getevo.net*

❸ WICK & SKULL GAMING CANDLES

The Wick and Skull team had the intriguing idea of crafting high-end candles to match specific gaming experiences, and they may be onto something. Or maybe it's just nice to have your gaming space smell pleasant for a change. Shop by game, like Binding of Isaac's oak and musk-scented "Brimstone," or just choose a smell combo that appeals, like the lemon/ginger/saffron Health Potion.

$19.99 (apiece) | *wickandskull.com*

❹ THE ↑↑↓↓←→←→ BA MUG

We're not sure if the coffee you serve in this mug is going to give you 30 lives to get through the day, but at least it'll put a smile on your face, along with any other gamer who spies it. Ceramic construction holds up just fine to dishwasher and microwave attacks. No promises on alien assaults, though.

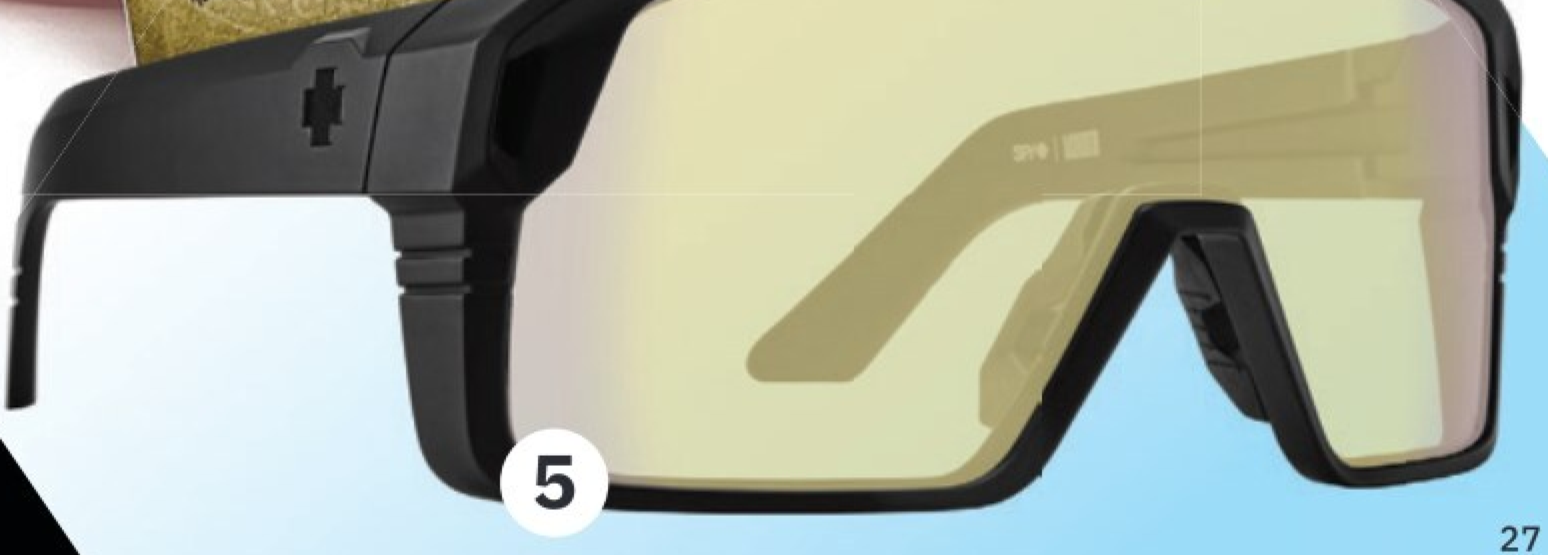
$19.99 | *officialkonamishop.com*

❺ HAPPY GAMING GLASSES

Eye strain is a near-universal challenge for gamers. A solid set of blue-light filtering eyewear can make a big difference and has the added side benefit of potentially improving your sleep routine. Spy Optic offers a range of designs; consider the Crossway or Boundless if style is a factor, while the Monolith should be your go-to if full wraparound coverage is the top priority.

$90-$150 | *spyoptic.com*

3
A creative gift
for gamers
MANA
potion
CITRUS - MANGO - CEDAR
SMELLS LIKE: REPLENISHED ENERGY AND ELEVATED CONSCIOUSNESS.
HEALTH
potion
LEMON - GINGER - SAFFRON
SMELLS LIKE: INCREASED VITALITY, REGENERATION, AND RECOVERY.



Perfect for family night

❶ LEGO CARNOTAURUS DINOSAUR CHASE

The *Jurassic World* fiction has a powerful ability to unite kids and adults in a shared love of dinosaurs. And the series has a lot of excitement around it right now, from an animated series to the big new film. While you can find more complex sets from LEGO, this chase scene offers a rewarding mix of mini-figs, vehicles, and of course, a rampaging dino.

$49.99 | *lego.com*

Straight from the game

❷ MILES MORALES BUST

Immaculately sculpted to present Spider-Man as he appeared in his recent video game, this 10-inch bust features textured detail across the mask, and the vibrant reds pop just like they do off the screen. The golden shock effect is the perfect accompanying wrap, adding to the already impressive silhouette.

$175 | *gentlegiantltd.com*

❸ TMNT: TURTLES IN TIME PIRATE ROCKSTEADY & BEBOP

NECA's Turtles line-up continues to impress, with fun poseable figures and an impressive array of characters. We're partial to the pixelated touches added to the Turtles in Time line, which gleefully recalls that classic arcade game and all its bonkers stages, including this fan-favorite encounter against pirate-themed Rocksteady and his rapier, alongside his buddy Bebop, whip in hand.

$59.99 | *necaonline.com*

❹ SONIC THE HEDGEHOG GALLERY DIORAMA

This five-pound and roughly 5-inch sculpture nails the look of the recent film version of Big Blue's adventures, depicting the little hedgehog at 1/6 scale as he stands atop one of Robotnik's drones.

$44.99 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

❺ DUNGEONS & DRAGONS CATTIE-BRIE STATUE

D&D has had decades to build up a stable of memorable characters across novels, comics, and campaign adventures. But we've seen all too few collectibles from the brand. That's why this slick 8.65-inch statue is so gratifying, bringing R.A. Salvatore's Cattie-brie to life in her original bow-wielding badassery. Who needs a drow ranger when you're wielding Taulmaril?

$59.99 | *gamestop.com*

Atrix FPS Wired Mechanical Keyboard with RGB

In the world of first-person shooters, milliseconds separate celebrations from frustrations. The Atrix Sniper Keyboard delivers the tactile touch and rapid response the pros rely on. Stay on the target with an RGB keyboard that lights your way with customizable colors and shine-through keycaps. **$49.99**

Atrix Premium Gaming Chair

Built for the dedicated gamer, the Atrix Premium Gaming Chair boasts a solid steel frame, flexible arm rests, and sophisticated rocking mechanism for 155 degrees of tilt. Full lumbar support and breathable memory foam cushions ensure you'll comfortably enjoy this chair for hours upon hours of gameplay. **$199.99**

Atrix Air Mouse

Twitch reflexes and pinpoint precision are the difference between victory and defeat in your favorite first-person shooter. The Atrix Air Mouse provides the tactical advantage you've been looking for. With 16,000 DPI (dots per inch), every minute movement is accurate and lightning fast. This nine-button mouse allows you to execute every move in style with multiple RGB light modes. **$39.99**

Atrix AX-1250 Wireless Gaming Headset for PlayStation/PC

The 5.8GHz wireless connection ensures you hear every sound as it happens and never miss a beat. With a 50-foot range and a 20-hour battery life, your squad will get its win long before it's time to recharge. **$99.99**

Atrix AX-1150 Universal Wired Gaming Headset

Be prepared for a revolution in sound. This headset is unmatched when it comes to pro audio in a sleek and lightweight design. With large 50mm drivers and 7.1 surround sound, you'll hear every footstep, shot, and loot chest from across the map. **$69.99**

Atrix Face Padding Set for Oculus Quest 2

An extra layer of comfort for an all-day immersive VR experience. **$19.99**

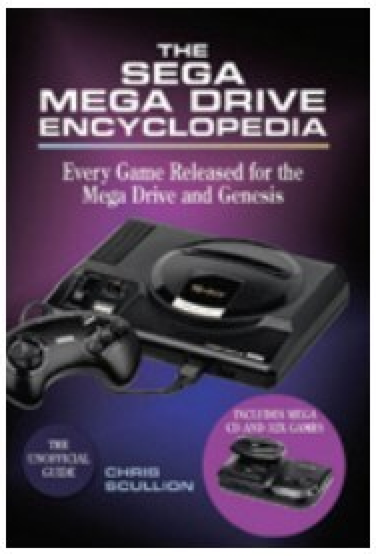
Atrix Dual Charging Station for PlayStation 4

LED lights indicate charging level. Full charge in only two to three hours. **$19.99**

GameStop

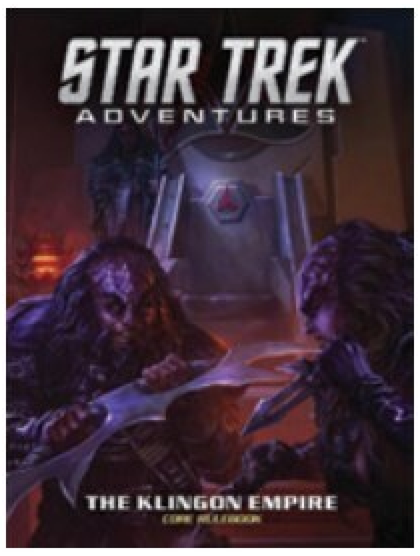
gamestop.com

BOOKS & RPGS



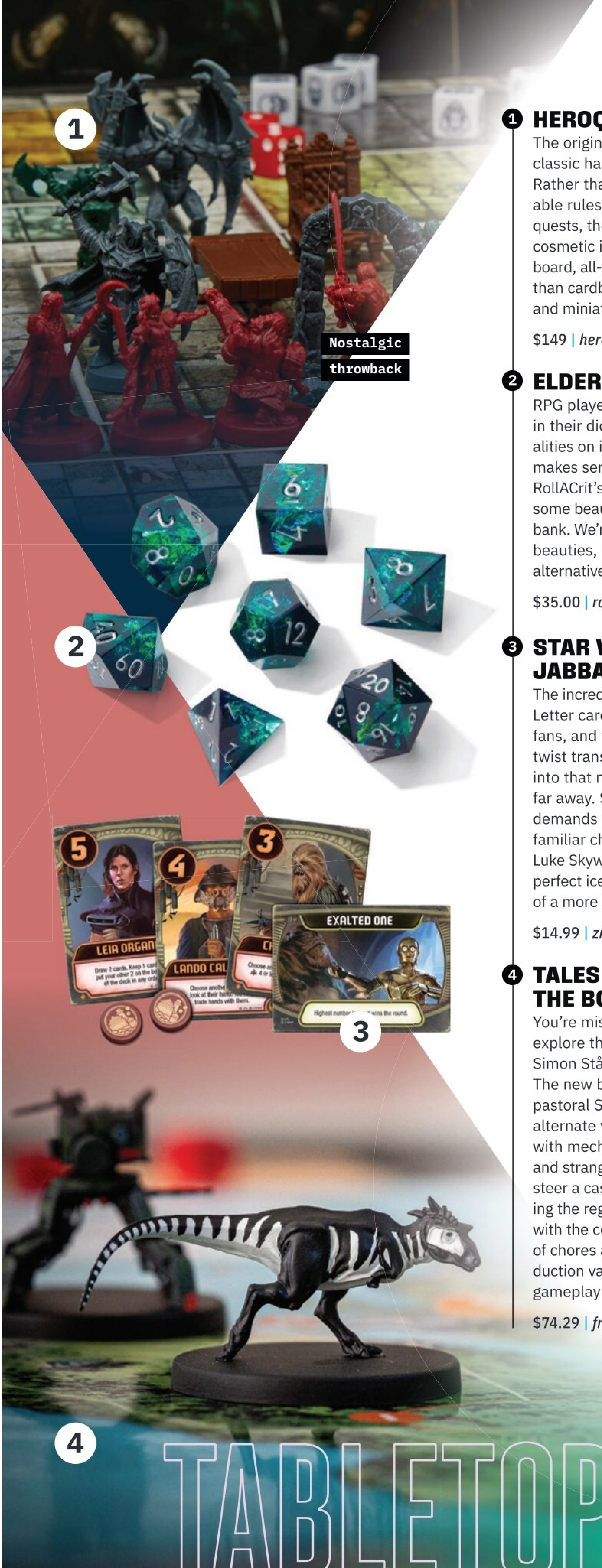
THE SEGA MEGA DRIVE/ GENESIS ENCYCLOPEDIA
$39.95
casemateipm.com

THE LABYRINTH
$39.99
simonstalenhag.se



KLINGON STAR TREK ADVENTURES
$63.00
modiphius.net

WANDERHOME
$45.00
possumcreekgames.com



TABLETOP

❶ HEROQUEST

The original 1989 dungeon-crawling classic has received a loving remake. Rather than mess with the approachable rules and fondly remembered quests, the new version mostly opts for cosmetic improvements, like a larger board, all-plastic furniture pieces (rather than cardboard), and a slew of new art and miniature sculpts.

$149 | *heroquest.avalonhill.com*

❷ ELDER GODS RESIN DICE

RPG players take a great deal of pride in their dice, often imbuing personalities on individual polyhedrons, so it makes sense you'd want a high-end set. RollACrit's sharp-edged resin dice have some beautiful flair without breaking the bank. We're partial to these Lovecraftian beauties, but there's a wide array of alternatives to suit your style.

$35.00 | *rollacrit.com*

❸ STAR WARS: JABBA'S PALACE

The incredibly simple but engaging Love Letter card game deserves its many fans, and this new *Star Wars*-themed twist translates that core structure into that most familiar of galaxies far, far away. Social deduction gameplay demands you pay close attention as familiar characters like Boba Fett and Luke Skywalker come into play. This is a perfect icebreaker for series fans ahead of a more involved evening of gaming.

$14.99 | *zmangames.com*

❹ TALES FROM THE LOOP: THE BOARD GAME

You're missing out if you've yet to explore the retro sci-fi aesthetics of Simon Stålenhag's fascinating world. The new board game brings life to a pastoral Scandinavian setting in an alternate version of the 1980s filled with mechanical walkers, dinosaurs, and strange phenomena. Cooperatively steer a cast of kids as they juggle solving the region's mysteries and dealing with the comparatively mundane tasks of chores and home life. Stellar production value and innovative freeform gameplay are sure to fascinate.

$74.29 | *freeleaguepublishing.com*

⑤ DESTINIES

This competitive dark medieval fantasy game supports one to three players on a story- and choice-driven adventure. Players choose their character, then usher them to their destiny with the help of an accompanying digital app, built to enrich the storytelling and lend increased nuance. Easy to learn but still impressively deep, it's a novel experience that is almost RPG-like.

$49.99 | *luckyduckgames.com*

⑥ TAL'DOREI CAMPAIGN SETTING REBORN

Critical Role's much-beloved campaign book is a treasure trove of info and art on the streaming series' sprawling fantasy world. Darrington Press offers a lovely hardback edition and has also partnered with the team at Beadle and Grimm's to offer luxurious boxed set versions. These include tons of bonus content, in-world handouts, giant maps, and even jewelry pieces – the very definition of collector's editions for those truly dedicated Critters out there.

$49.99 (standard), $249 (Awakened), $349 (Exalted) | *darringtonpress.com, store.beadleandgrimms.com*

5
6
TAL'DOREI
REBORN
Mercer + Hannah Rose + James J. Haeck

Splurge-worthy editions available

GROW Song of The Evertree
GRAND MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE Wonderlands
DODGEBALL ACADEMIA
TROPICO 6 NEXT GEN EDITION
AFTER THE FALL FRONTRUNNER EDITION
STRANDED DEEP
COMING SOON
GET 'EM AT
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org

MUSIC

BORIS - *W*
$10.00
sacredbonesrecords.com

THE
HEART
BEHEAD
YOU

FOXY SHAZAM - *THE HEART BEHEAD YOU*
$10.00
foxyshazam.bigcartel.com

STING
THE BRIDGE

STING - *THE BRIDGE*
$13.00
shop.sting.com

LAUREL HELL
mitski

MITSKI - *LAUREL HELL*
$12.99
mitski.com

1
HDMI
EZQuest

`For your`
`new-gen console`

❶ EZQUEST ULTRA HD HDMI CABLES

Anyone who has spent enough time around electronics can tell you that you should be cautious of overpriced wiring solutions. But that doesn't mean you should still be rocking that old HDMI 1.0 cable that came with your console 10 years ago. EZQuest's Ultra HD cables offer a good combination of affordability and quality. Nylon braiding and solid aluminum connection housings hold up to punishment, but it's the support for just about any high-end connection that should give you peace of mind.

$19.99 | *ezq.com*

❷ ESL IOS MOBILE GAMING CONTROLLER

If you've found yourself embracing the growing potential of the mobile gaming scene, it won't be long before you want something more robust than a touch-screen input option. The ESL offers a familiar shape and form factor for console gamers, a raised mount into which your phone can comfortably rest, and passthrough charging. Play experience is strong with no recognizable lag.

$59.99 | *riotpwr.com*

❸ IPAD MINI

The latest iteration of the iPad mini is uniquely suited to those looking for a combination of portability and strong gaming performance. The 8.3" display is smaller than its cousins, but loses no clarity in its liquid retina display, and the blazingly fast A15 Bionic chip matches what you'll find in the latest iPhone 13 Pro. Tech jargon aside? This little beast looks great, plays fast, and should impress whether you're gaming, streaming movies, or just about anything else.

Starting at $499 | *apple.com*

❹ PS5 DUALSENSE QUICK CHARGING STAND

The curved cradle design of Razer's new DualSense chargers is the biggest plus here. It makes it easy to drop your expended controller in after a long night of gaming, as it slides effortlessly into place without any plug-ins. It's also nice that the restrained visual design matches the standard DualSense colors, and all at a very manageable price.

$39.99 | *razer.com*

❺ XSCREEN FOR XBOX SERIES S

Turn your Xbox Series S into a portable system with the amazing XScreen from UPspec gaming. This 1080p 60hz resolution display plugs right into the back of your Xbox and is powered by it, meaning you won't need any additional cables other than your Xbox power. The screen functions like a laptop and folds down onto the Xbox, allowing for easy transportation, especially in the Xscreen carry case (sold separately).

$249 | *upspecgaming.com*

❻ PHILIPS FIDELIO L3 ANC HEADPHONES

Competition is fierce in the over-ear wireless headphones scene. But the L3 makes a compelling case, offering stellar noise-cancellation, a comfortable fit, and a warm but balanced soundscape that makes music listening especially enjoyable. A classy but understated design and impressive overall performance makes this one you should add into consideration as you juggle the many options on the market.

$349 | *usa.philips.com*

Next-level racing

❼ XBOX FORCE FEEDBACK RACING WHEEL DLX

Designed for use with a wide variety of Xbox Series X/S or Xbox One racing games, Hori's force feedback brings you about as close to hugging those curves as you can get without being in a real driver's seat. Heavy pedals stay put while the dual-motor feedback-driven wheel clamps to a table or other flat surface. The pushback sensation is impressive at full power, but extensive fine-tuning options let you fully customize your ride.

$299 | *stores.horiusa.com*

Super portable storage up to 1 TB

❽ SANDISK 128 DUAL DRIVE LUXE USB TYPE-C

Pause for a moment and think about how wild it is that this tiny drive, less than two inches long, can hold 128 GB of data, and higher-priced options go up to 1 TB! We like the extreme portability of this unobtrusive drive, which is ideal for data transfer for those USB Type-C devices in your life, from mobile phones and tablets to PCs. ■

$19.99 | *westerndigital.com*

FILM & TV

ROBOTECH COLLECTOR'S EDITION SET

$249

shop.funimation.com

ENCANTO

$24.99

movies.disney.com

ETERNALS

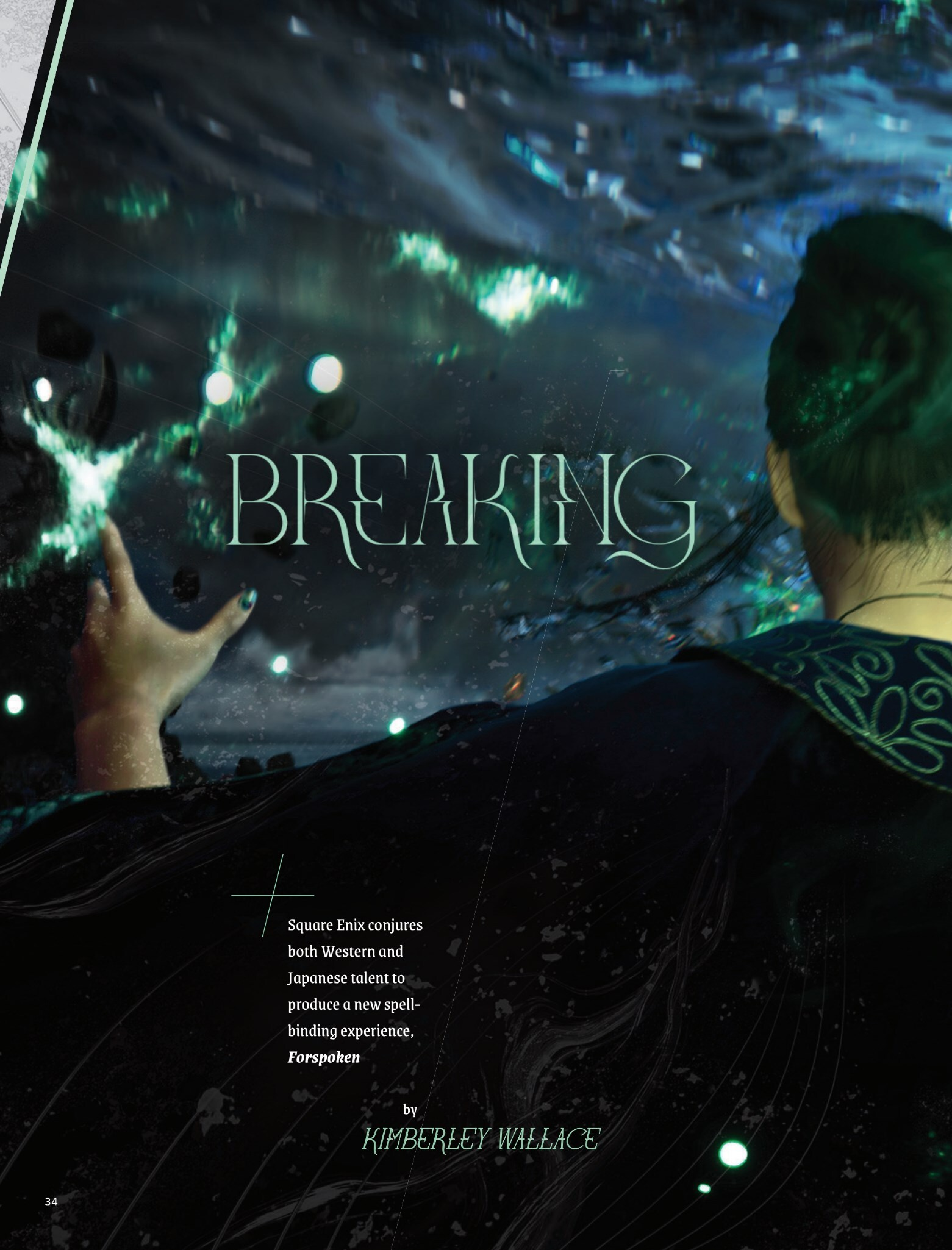
$24.99

disneymovieinsiders.com

BROOKLYN NINE-NINE THE COMPLETE SERIES

$79.99

uphe.com



BREAKING

Square Enix conjures both Western and Japanese talent to produce a new spell-binding experience, ***Forspoken***

by

KIMBERLEY WALLACE

THE FANTASY

For decades, Square Enix has depended on its core franchises, such as Final Fantasy, Kingdom Hearts, and Dragon Quest, to wow and dazzle its audience. But the acclaimed Japanese publisher is taking more chances and bringing in new lifeblood to bolster its homegrown offerings and remain competitive. Enter Luminous Productions, a new studio within Square Enix created for the sole purpose of developing new IP that leverages the latest tech, with a focus on producing the striking art on which the company has built its reputation.

Open-world, action/RPG Forspoken is Luminous Productions' debut IP, offering a proving ground for what the studio can do and could become. With the stakes high, Square Enix is trying new strategies. It's bringing Western talent on board to help create Forspoken's hero and story while using lessons from Final Fantasy XV's bigger world to craft a different experience than we've come to expect from the publisher. The result is a fish-out-of-water adventure with a savvy and sarcastic young woman who is mysteriously transported from New York to a fantastical land full of evil sorceresses, dragons, and magic.

To learn more about Square Enix's next big project, we chatted with the development team to discover how Forspoken is about so much more than just powerful spells and unique traversal. We even toured a never-before-seen area that showcases the world's variety. Get ready to learn how fantasy and reality converge in Forspoken. This isn't your typical fairytale, nor is it Square Enix's typical approach to development.

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions **RELEASE** October 11

"FORSPOKEN BEGAN WITH THE DESIRE TO CREATE A WORLD RULED BY WOMEN"

– writer Allison Rymer

Frey suddenly has all this power in her hands. Will she use it for good?

A NEW APPROACH

Introduced as Project Athia in June 2020, Square Enix has slowly been pulling back the curtain on Forspoken, offering small looks at the game's magic, parkour, and main character. In many ways, much of the game is still a mystery, with Square Enix keeping mum on the larger narrative beats and open-world activities. From our conversations, it's clear that Forspoken is a big moment for Square Enix and Luminous Productions, and there's a nervous excitement in the air, perhaps because Forspoken is so different from what's been done before by the publisher.

When Luminous Productions was founded in April 2018, the goal was to develop new triple-A franchises using Square Enix's internally-developed Luminous Engine, first used on Final Fantasy XV. Forspoken is the first Luminous Productions game to launch within the PS5 lifecycle, adding an extra amount of challenge for the team. "We wanted to create a game experience that really leveraged [the PS5 hardware], and so that's essentially where we started off with the project," says Luminous Productions head and Forspoken director Takeshi Aramaki, pointing to the new gen's solid state drives and their fast load speeds as great advantages for an open-world game.

"We also felt like we'd be able to really create a high-density map, and utilize that in the expression of the world and how we present it," he further explains. "And also, because of this [technology], we felt the fast-paced traversal would also be possible, and so, Forspoken has been designed based on those possibilities."

The evil Tantas have special minions, ready to do their dirty work

Square Enix isn't exactly known for tackling open-world games, but the team working on Forspoken isn't entirely new to this type of design, either. Half of Luminous Productions' employees previously worked on Final Fantasy XV. This is not only where the Luminous Engine made its debut, but the game eschewed the series' linear tradition with bigger, more open areas for the beginning sequences. "There was a lot that they built upon with the knowledge of Final Fantasy XV," Aramaki says. "For example, some of our monster animations, you may feel like there are some similarities, but that is because there was some influence from the things that they've learned through XV."

However, Aramaki says the team also took time to reevaluate what didn't work in Final Fantasy XV. Two areas immediately stuck out: story development and cutscene direction. To shore up these weaknesses, the primarily Japanese studio looked to a new place: the Western talent pool. About 10 percent of Luminous Productions' are not native to Japan. This may not seem like a lot, but overseas hires are filling big roles, and Aramaki sees it as an important shift that matches the studio's mission for innovation. "We've brought in new technologies as well as new artists, new members, and we do feel like the team as a whole has evolved further," Aramaki says. "We have various Western talent also participating in the development of the game, for example, on the scenario front and otherwise. This is an approach that not very many Japanese studios have taken prior to this."

The writing team is the biggest area of Western talent on display. Gary Whitta, best known for his writing on *Book of Eli* and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, came up with the original concept for Forspoken, primarily working on world-building in its earliest stage. From there, the respected and talented Amy Hennig of Uncharted and Jak and Daxter fame crafted those ideas into the plot. Allison Rymer, who worked with Whitta in those early stages, and Todd Stashwick, who has been partnering with Hennig on projects since 2013, helped with the script's final transformation, writing the dialogue and bringing the characters to life. "Luminous Productions gave Amy, Allison, and myself a lot of creative freedom on the project," Stashwick says. "That freedom continued when Allison and I dove into crafting and building story, character, world, and script. Allison and I worked great together. We were constantly encouraged by the team to discover and build."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HERO'S JOURNEY

With creative freedom in their hands, Rymer and Stashwick created a backdrop full of contrasting ideas and imperfect people. The world of Athia may look like a beautiful place right out of a book of fairytales, but in reality, it's consumed by a malevolent arcane fog called the Break, which has corrupted people, animals, and the land. "Anyone who was out there caught in the Break has turned into kind of these twisted creatures and monsters," explains creative producer Raio Mitsuno. "Wildlife that used to be out there just happily roaming around, now are these mutated beasts and feral creatures. That's the dire situation that this is, but everything is still very beautiful beneath the surface."

Athia clearly needs a savior, but leading character Frey, voiced by actress Ella Balinska (*Charlie's Angels*), isn't what you'd call a textbook hero. When we meet Frey, she's at a low point in her life. After growing up in the foster system and persevering through her difficult upbringing, she is now trying to brave it in New York City with only her cat, Homer, to confide in. According to Stashwick, she's a good person at heart, but her desperate circumstances have caused her to put herself in some bad situations.

"With Frey, we wanted to explore a young woman who is alone," he explains. "She feels no sense of place in the world. She is at a crucial moment, on the verge of adulthood, and has had a hard go. Having only yourself to rely on, New York City can be an unforgiving place. But the real meat of the story is in Athia, because ultimately this is a spirited fantasy adventure, and like Dorothy, who went to Oz, Frey must go to Athia, to learn her true purpose."

Similar to Dorothy, Frey gets mysteriously transported to a strange world and must find a way back home. Except, suddenly, she's bestowed with magical powers and a talking cuff [see Frey Versus Cuff sidebar] on her arm guiding her through this medieval landscape. It's a lot to make sense of, and Frey's number-one goal is to find a way out of this fantasy gone terribly wrong. However, Frey possesses a special power: she's unaffected by the Break, and part of the story will be finding out exactly why that is. Frey will also have her share of conflicts. When asked what they will be, Stashwick offers the following teases: "A Hell's Kitchen Gang. The New York legal system. The council of Athia. The evil Tantas. Her own self-doubt. Freaky beasts and a dragon."

One thing that was important to the writers was to create a relatable, flawed main character in Frey. As Mitsuno puts it: "That human quality of Frey is what we think a lot of players are really going to connect with." Many times in our interviews, it was brought up that Frey is not just going to embrace the role of a hero because Athia needs it, and she will not always say and do the right thing. It will take her time to adjust to the huge stakes before her and find the confidence within herself to surpass not just Athia's obstacles but her personal ones.

Yes, Frey may suddenly be fighting dragons, but all of her insecurities and abandonment issues from her life in New York will follow her, surfacing in unexpected ways in this unusual place. "We wanted to make Frey the anti-hero," Rymer says. "When you meet her, she isn't the kind of person who's going to put her neck on the line, especially for someone she doesn't know. But can you blame her? Nobody's really done that for her... At least not yet. Through Frey's eyes, we wanted to tell a story about humanity. How even in the bleakest of times, there can still be hope and kindness. And sometimes it takes a little help to see that – sometimes it takes being thrown into a strange new world."

The writers call it a journey of self-discovery for Frey, and similar to her life, nothing will come easy, especially as she has to confront the evil Tantas, matriarchs that govern Athia's different regions [see Bringing The Tantas To Life sidebar]. "The team wanted the Tantas to represent virtues, such as strength, justice, and more," Stashwick says. "We explored the many facets of what those virtues mean – what are the extremes on both ends of that. Turning them inside out to unearth how the corruption affected them. Then on top of that, they are also people who aren't just one thing, people with pain and pathos and humor and compassion."

Frey Versus Cuff

When Frey shows up in Athia, she's greeted by a sentient bracelet wrapped around her arm. She appropriately nicknames it Cuff. Throughout the game, you'll uncover why Cuff has a voice, but he's often there to banter with Frey. Their relationship feels very contentious, with Cuff even taking jabs at how you play, straight up telling you when you're bad at dodging. But he's also valuable; he'll help you when you get lost by pointing you on the right path, and will even comment to prepare you for incoming enemy attacks. He also gives Frey the ability to scan the environment for items and crafting materials.

"Frey and Cuff have attachment issues," says story writer Allison Rymer. "And not like what you think. Frey can't get him off her wrist! No matter how hard she tries and, believe me, she tries – especially because Cuff can be a bit of a harsh critic and very demanding. And Frey doesn't like being told what to do. So, Cuff and Frey don't hit it off right out of the gate. But as they get to know each other and battle together, their relationship changes. It begins to grow. They form a respect – as much as two very stubborn personalities can."

SEEING THE FANTASY IN ACTION

To get a better idea of the gameplay and world, Square Enix showed us a hands-off demo featuring a never-before-seen area called Avoalet. In contrast to Praenost, previously seen in trailers, which featured more reddish and brown hues for its drier, desert landscape, Avoalet is much more colorful with vegetation abound, making you feel like you're walking through a beautiful forest. Since this realm is overseen by Tanta Prav, who represents the virtue of justice, the artists wanted the locale to represent her powers, which harness water and gravity. "The realms have a color palette," Mitsuno says. "Avoalet is very blue and lush with green and flowers and bodies of water, but the Break has done really messed up stuff to the landscape."

The deeper you get into regions in Forspoken, the more you experience the Break's corruption and watch the world transform. Enemies get more warped and dangerous, depending on how concentrated the Break is. For now, we have clear skies and creatures resembling deer roaming the land, but as we'll see later in our demo, things will take a darker turn.

ONE THING THAT WAS IMPORTANT TO THE WRITERS WAS TO CREATE A RELATABLE, FLAWED MAIN CHARACTER IN FREY

The Break may be ugly, but there's also plenty of beauty in this cruel world

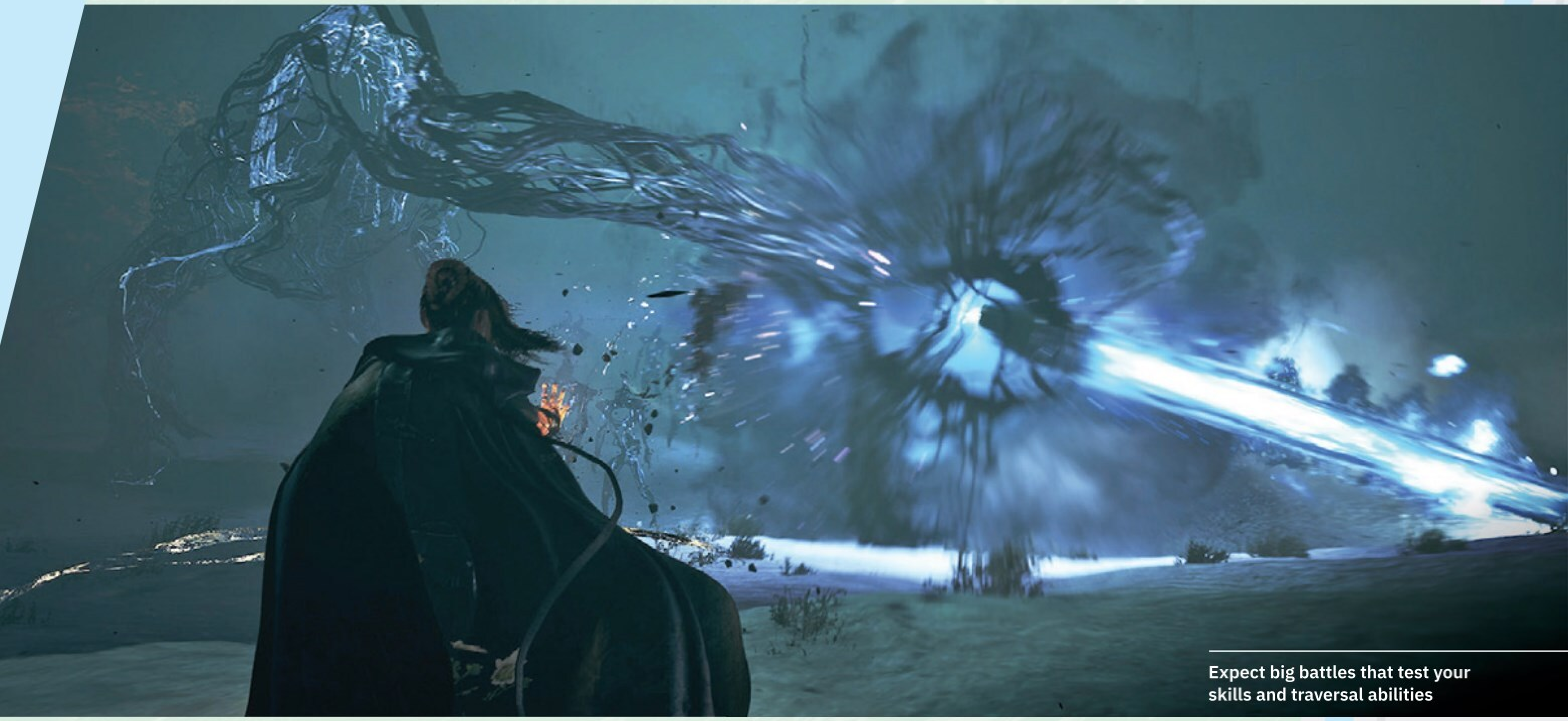
Bringing The Tantas To Life

The maddened sorceresses who rule the different shattered domains of Athia play a huge role in Frey's journey, and each has their own virtue they exemplify. So far, Square Enix has revealed Tanta Sila and Tanta Prav, voiced by Janina Gavankar (*True Blood*, Star Wars Battlefront II) and Pollyanna McIntosh (*The Walking Dead*), respectively. Sila represents strength, while Prav embodies justice. "All these Tantas used to be benevolent rulers of Athia," says creative producer Raio Mitsuno. "And at the onset of the Break, something happened to them, and they became very twisted and no longer kind of the good virtue that they represented."

Tanta Sila was previously fighting on the frontlines, protecting Athia from invaders, but now she's more dictatorial and wants to crush everything in her path. Once a hero, she's now an enemy. Gavankar calls her "the baddest b---- in the realm" and says playing her was an adrenaline rush. "Tanta Sila gets me hot," she says. "Physically hot. When she goes nuclear, tears stream down my face ... but I enjoy it."

Tanta Prav was once a moral compass for Athia, but her pursuit for the truth has become twisted. During the game, you'll witness her inner struggle of trying to be fair, but her corrupted self taking over and destroying that virtue. McIntosh was used to playing darker roles, but enjoyed "getting to go to Gollum-like levels of conflict" and had a lot of fun finding her maniacal laugh. "Tanta Prav is a complexly layered character in an extraordinarily well-created world," she says. "This was evident from the writing, and it drew me to her."

AT ANY GIVEN TIME, YOU HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR ENTIRE MAGIC ARESENAL, MEANING THERE'S NO LIMIT TO HOW MANY ABILITIES YOU CAN EQUIP AT ONCE

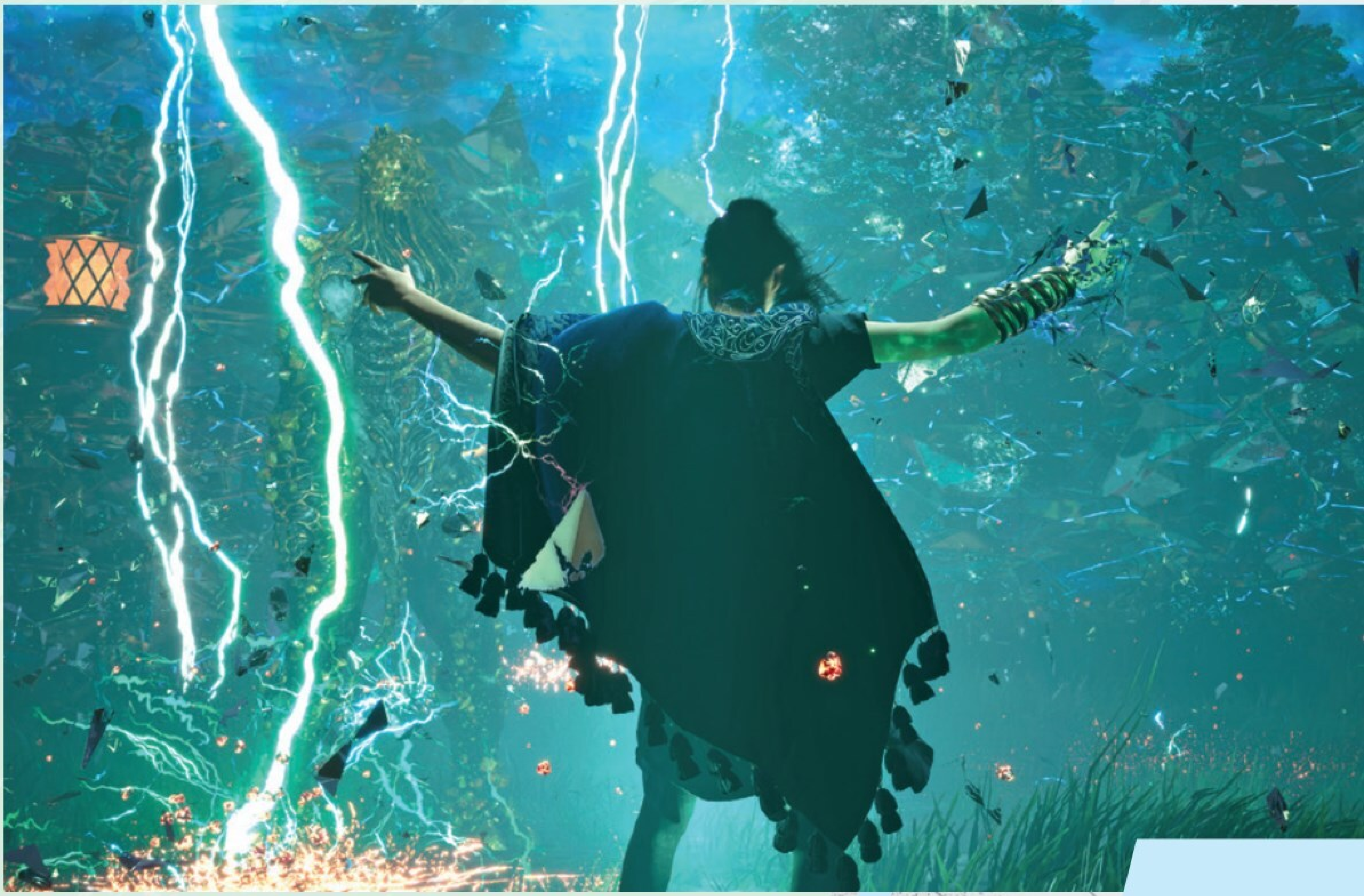


Expect big battles that test your skills and traversal abilities

QUICK TAKE

Athia's leading ladies stand out in Forspoken. The Tantas we've met embody Strength and Justice, but distorted by the Break, the land's rulers are on a collision course with the heroine Frey. That conflict could pave the way for a delightfully nuanced narrative alongside some magically powered fights.

- JILL GRODT



Forspoken appears to be a good mix of combat and exploration, with the latter being amplified by the magic parkour. The traversal looks fluid and stylish, as Frey can take athletic strides and gigantic leaps to navigate the world. In our demo, she swings around tree branches to launch herself in the air, but she also uses a spell or two to quickly reach higher areas. Her Zip spell, which allows her to quickly locate and catapult between anchor points, complements Avoalet's cliffs' rocky edges, which give her easy-to-access points to latch onto. You do take fall damage, so you can't fly through the air with reckless abandon, but you can mitigate damage by using a spell to soften the landing.

"We really put a lot of effort into making sure that the parkour just felt really good," says co-director Takefumi Terada, emphasizing the team did a lot of trial-and-error to make sure obstacles, such as buildings, didn't feel like a hindrance to getting around the world but instead something players could have a fun time pushing through. That doesn't mean there aren't times you won't be challenged, though.

"It's not that you can just blow through the entire world without facing any obstacles at all," Terada says. "There's going to be areas where you're going to have to walk at a normal speed, or you need to find your own path through certain landscapes."

Parkour isn't just a way to navigate the world, it's also an asset in battle. While most of your time will be spent casting magic, you can use the magic parkour to your advantage to avoid incoming attacks. But be aware that some enemies possess attacks you can't dodge, and you have a limited pool of resources to use magic parkour, so you can't spam it blindly.

As far as spells go, we saw a wide variety on display, from a fiery sword that slices foes to protective spells like a water column, which blocks incoming ranged attacks. Some spells, like one called Shot, produce small, bullet-like blasts which function like infinite ammo. Others, such as Cluster Bolt, which causes arrows to rain down from the sky for an AoE attack, operate on a cooldown. Mitsuno's favorite is called Naedre, a snake-looking spell that homes in on enemies, which he says is especially beneficial for targeting foes that move around a lot. Finding worthwhile magic combos to give you an edge in battle should also factor into the fun. Whether it's leveraging spells that stop an enemy's motion or give your next attack a big boost, there's plenty of room for experimentation.

At any given time, you have access to your entire magic arsenal, meaning there's no limit to how many abilities you can equip at once. To easily swap between your various abilities, the L1 and R1 buttons bring up a ring menu, slowing the battle to give you time to figure out which spell you want to use. Several magical abilities are unlocked through story progression, but you also get mana points by doing things in the world, like defeating enemies or clearing certain events. The points can then be used to advance your current magic or learn new spells. This allows you to level up enchantments you find beneficial or keep finding new magic to replace the dregs.

"Certain spells have different levels, and it's about how you want to progress your character and how you want to spend those points on the character progression," Mitsuno says. "So certain magic spells are just a one-off and don't have levels, and some do. It's really about which ones you want to strengthen or if you want to learn new ones, and that just all contributes to how you want to fight in Forspoken."

And just because you have magical powers doesn't mean you're stuck battling from afar if that's not your preference. Luminous Productions considered many different play styles when creating the system, offering an array of spells to support different strategies. "There's so many ways to fight, and it's catered to any player out there," Mitsuno says. "If you want to fight strategically and set traps, you could do that. If you want to play defensively and stay away from the enemy as you're shooting range attacks, you could do that, too. Or, if you're like me and want to get into the action and go crazy with combos, there's a lot of melee-style magic spells as well."

Selecting what spells you want to use is about more than just your play style. Every foe has different vulnerabilities, so if you want to get enemies down quickly, this is a good strategy to exploit. Mitsuno said it's not make-or-break to success and Luminous Productions made the system to allow players to use the spells they want rather than getting bogged down with switching things constantly. You can also stagger enemies if you weaken them enough with an attack, leaving an opening to land a killer blow. Mitsuno says the bigger battles will come down to learning enemy patterns and being aware of your surroundings. Bosses will rarely fight you without having some reinforcements vying for your attention.

During our trek, we see many different adversaries, from zombies, which are sadly former residents of Athia who could not escape the Break, to Tanta Prav's Unjust Enforcers. These minions fight in groups, put up strong barriers, and use ranged attacks to keep you as far away as possible. Typical enemy encounters can be chaotic, with opponents attacking from all directions. Still, they pale in comparison to a miniboss called the Pitiless Arbiter that looks like something straight out of Dark Souls. In keeping with Prav's theme, the boss is dressed in all black like a judge, holding scales of justice and a large ax. The Arbiter is stunning visually, swinging the ax with reckless abandon. When it's deciding its next move, the scales light up blue, with Cuff noting that it's "weighing its next move." If you stay out of its way, you can wait for openings like these to attack.

Square Enix confirmed Forspoken does not have microtransactions, but will have DLC

FUN IN THE DISCOVERY

When you're out exploring, there's an exciting sense of discovery to figuring out the mystery behind this world and why things took such an ugly turn. According to Terada, the side quests further explore the game's lore and mostly focus on two big aspects: the places and people. "Since you're traversing a world that's kind of gone to ruins ... on the map, you can see buildings that used to be there, or things that used to exist, but that have fallen," Terada explains. "You can use [the map] to go back and figure out what happened to this land and the history behind this world. And the second point is just human drama. There's obviously a lot of people who have died or suffered because of the circumstances within the story. By talking to the NPCs and finding out more about what they're going through, you'll be able to achieve an understanding of more of the sub-story."

Our demo let us see some of the side activities in the expansive world. Seat of Reflections are optional, difficult dungeons located throughout Athia that usually culminate in a vicious boss encounter. It's for those who crave a challenge, and they're worth your while as they usually contain some valuable goodies, whether it's crafting materials or new gear. Square Enix wouldn't say how many of these are in the game, but Terada did say players would be running into them on a pretty frequent basis and he felt like the team "prepared a significant volume for players to enjoy."

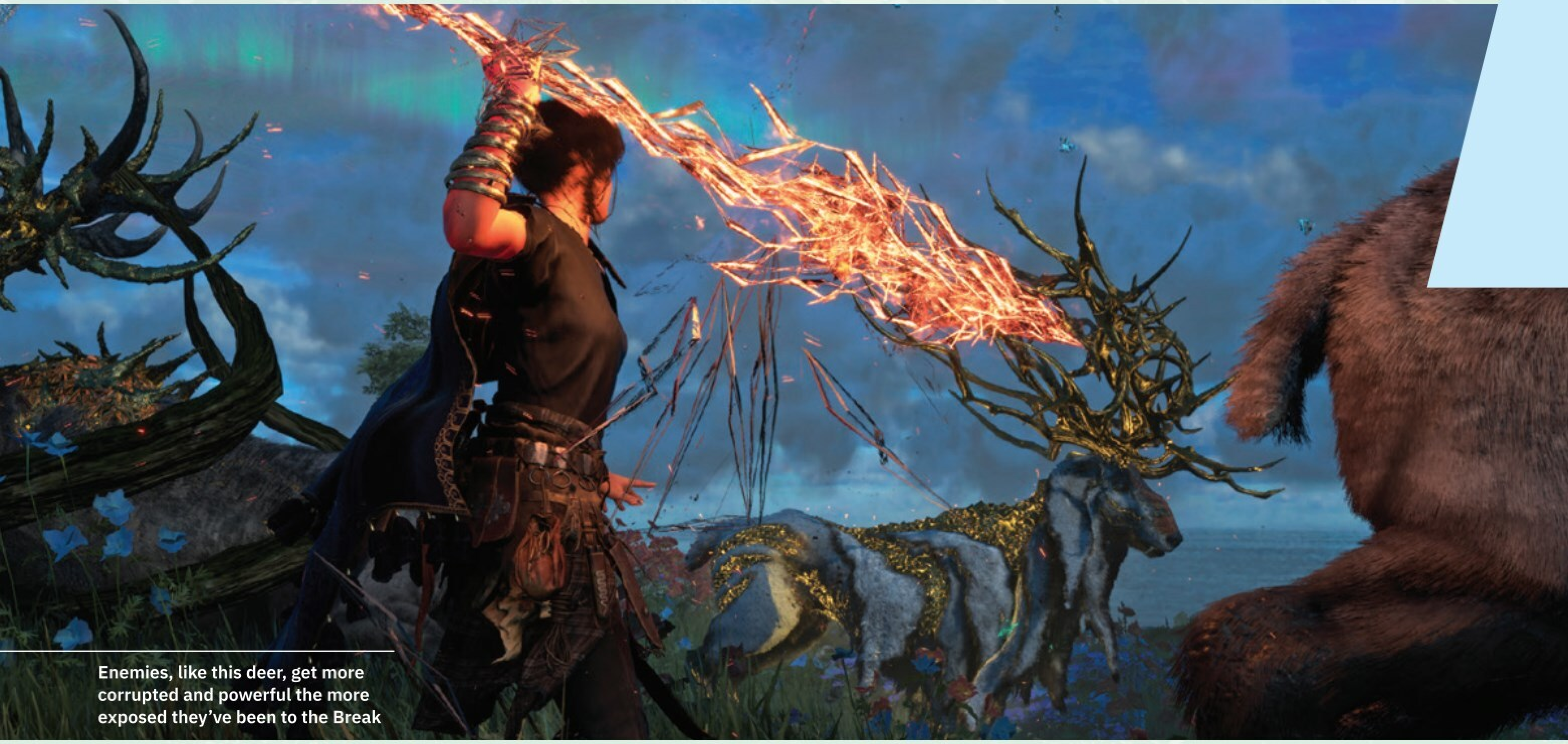
Every Tanta has her own special monument. Tracking them down in the world and clearing them of the Break allows these structures to regain their original form and helps Frey get a power-up. In the case of our demo, Frey got a stat boost of five defensive points for restoring the Monument To Strength.

Along your trek, you will also discover different "Refuges," which are areas safe from enemies. Here, Frey can craft items like healing potions, increase her carrying capacity, or upgrade her gear, which consists of cloaks and necklaces. According to Mitsuno, these buildings always have something to find, and you'll learn more about the world's lore by picking up artifacts located inside each Refuge. Guilds are also destinations worth visiting to discover more about the world's lore, as they were previously occupied by Athia scholars, and you can explore their research. However, unlike Refuges being safe from harm, monsters can always hide inside these vacated places, waiting to disrupt your discoveries.

If that isn't enough to satisfy your itch to learn more about this world, you can also visit abandoned villages. These corrupted locales house plenty of baddies, but just like the Seat of Reflections, hold great rewards if you're willing to take the risk and face them. In our demo, one unlocked a brand-new cloak for Frey. Cloaks are Frey's main form of equipment, giving her great attack or defensive boosts. They alter her look, so it's a way to also pick the style you prefer.

As noted, Forspoken does have a crafting system, so searching every nook and cranny is to your advantage. "There are two main things that you can do with the crafting," Terada clarifies. "The first is just making items for healing and recovery. And then the second is to add strength or additional abilities to your gear or accessories. It's kind of like the Final Fantasy crafting customization element that you might be familiar with."

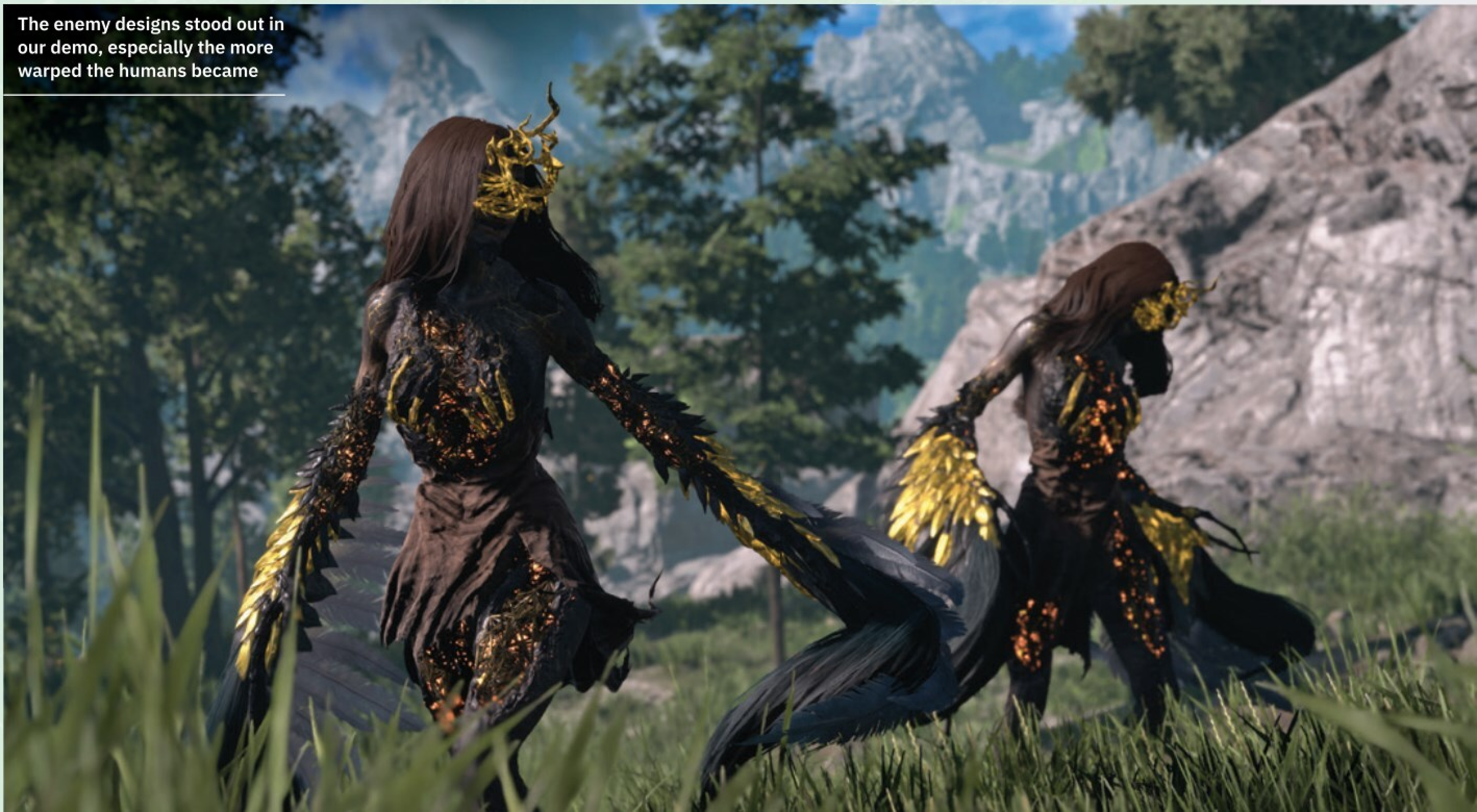
WHEN YOU'RE OUT EXPLORING, THERE'S AN EXCITING SENSE OF DISCOVERY TO FIGURING OUT THE MYSTERY BEHIND THIS WORLD AND WHY THINGS TOOK SUCH AN UGLY TURN


Enemies, like this deer, get more corrupted and powerful the more exposed they've been to the Break

Cipal: Your Central Locale

Cipal is the only place safe from the Break. Athia's citizens that managed to avoid corruption now reside there. It will be an important destination on Frey's journey – one that she will keep coming back to. "Cipal is definitely a central location in the game," says co-director Takefumi Terada. "It is the last place where humanity exists within this world. And so, there are a lot of NPCs and other important characters that reside in Cipal. Frey will be interacting with them throughout the game in order to gain insight into the world and develop as a character herself. [You'll] see some growth through her interaction with the people there."

IT'S HARD NOT TO ROOT FOR SOMETHING THAT CHALLENGES SQUARE ENIX'S STATUS QUO



The enemy designs stood out in our demo, especially the more warped the humans became

BLUE SKIES TURN DARK

Our demo saves the best for last, allowing us to see exactly how the world transforms the deeper we get into the Break's corruption. Those deer we saw earlier? They're much more challenging, and their physical appearance has become more twisted, with a more metallic gloss over their skin. Enemies have three different levels of corruption; the deeper they are into it, the more gold and silver hues you'll see in the design, indicating a shift in difficulty.

We have now entered an area called the Untrodden Forest in what Luminous Productions calls "The Depths of Corruption." The blue skies and colorful Avoalet we saw before is gone, and a dark, ominous fog has washed over the landscape. "The Depths of Corruption is what we call the really deep end of the Break in each realm," Mitsuno explains. "Everything looks much more foreboding and much more dangerous."

What was once the former castle town of Avoalet has turned into ruins. Each realm will be affected by the Break differently, with a different characteristic front and center. In the case of Avoalet, everything has literally been twisted, causing the entire city to appear slanted. It's now a sideways city for Frey to traverse. It not only looks cool on a visual level, but offers plenty of opportunities to use the magic parkour, and seeing the "warped reality" represented in this way is an interesting twist. But it's the final cutscene we see that leaves us stunned and wanting more.

This is where we finally meet Tanta Prav and get an idea of Frey's personality and the struggles she's facing with what it means to be a hero in this strange world. The scene begins with Frey arguing with Cuff that she doesn't want to kill Prav, but Cuff guilt trips Frey, reminding her that no one else possesses Frey's gift and it's her duty to use it. The denizens left in Athia will die if she doesn't take down Prav. Frey thinks maybe she can reason with Prav and ask her to stop the Break; Prav is the Tanta of Justice, after all.

As Frey enters her meeting with Prav, both her and Prav's hands are locked in a pillory. Cuff gives us a little background on Prav, saying she can see through any falsehood, so there's no use in lying to her. The walk to her is long, with two Pitiless Arbiters guiding us to our sentencing. Prav is a menacing presence and talks in rhymes. Something Frey isn't too keen on, shooting back, "If you're going to rhyme everything, just kill me now."

Prav wants Frey to stand trial, and seems to be questioning her past actions. Frey doesn't want to be judged; she just wants to talk. Out of nowhere, Prav's whole demeanor shifts. She begins shouting, turning into a more terrifying presence with every sentence. "I am the asker of questions, you are the answerer! Do you understand?!" Her corrupted side has taken over, and it's absolutely terrifying.

Prav asks Frey how she pleads, and when Frey says not guilty after the urging from Cuff, Prav shouts "Lies!" and sentences her to death by drowning. "A trial by water!" Prav says while laughing maniacally, sending Frey straight into the depths of a dark blue body of water. The scene ends there, but it's one of the most compelling parts we've seen of the game so far. In part because voice actress Pollyanna McIntosh nails the character's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde aspect. "Tanta Prav is conflicted," McIntosh says bluntly. "She is the Tanta of Justice who was once a balanced and fair matriarch and is now vengeful and illogical due to the effects of the Break. She battles the two parts of herself in a way that drives her to the edge of madness."

If this encounter is any indication of the tense moments in store, we can't wait for the full release. Luminous Productions may have a lot to prove with a new IP in Forspoken, especially tackling an open-world design and telling a different story, but it's hard not to root for something that challenges Square Enix's status quo and looks for new ways to shake things up. Time will tell if it works in the team's favor, but color us intrigued. ■

Check out GameInformer.com/Forspoken to learn more about Frey, the Tantas, and all the magical spells we saw in the game

Critical Hit!

We enter the wild, wild world of TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS, Gearbox's newest co-op shooter that takes the Borderlands formula and somehow ups the ante **BY BRIAN SHEA**

The Borderlands franchise has given players four mainline campaigns, a ton of downloadable content, multiple spin-off games, and even an upcoming feature film starring A-list Hollywood talent. But perhaps paramount to those accomplishments are the series' characters. Along the way, players have met the likes of Claptrap, Lilith, and Handsome Jack, who have captivated players, leading them to wonder what could possibly happen next in the wild world of Borderlands.

However, few characters are as memorable as Tiny Tina, the 13-year-old explosives expert introduced in the second game. Now, as the Borderlands franchise itself prepares to turn 13 years old later this year, Gearbox hands the reins of its ambitious new spin-off to the character that captured so many hearts (and likely stopped just as many from beating). We went hands-on with Tiny Tina's Wonderlands for hours and spoke with the team to learn why this unique direction for the franchise is such an exciting venture both for Gearbox and the series' devoted fan base.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) (PS5, Xbox Series X/S),
1 or 2-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) (PS4, Xbox One),
1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) (PC) **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Gearbox Software **RELEASE** March 25

TINY TINA, BIG IDEAS

Tiny Tina, voiced by Ashly Burch, proved to be an immediate hit with fans. She soon received her own downloadable content campaign for Borderlands 2, Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep. That DLC placed players in a game of "Bunkers & Badasses," an homage to Dungeons & Dragons, with Tiny Tina serving as the unpredictable "Bunker Master." Thanks to Tina's hilarious and unreliable narration, the high-fantasy themes, and comical references to fantasy games and movies, Assault on Dragon Keep is widely considered one of the best pieces of DLC in the series' history.

The team at Gearbox noticed that, in addition to latching onto Tiny Tina as a character, the player base also enjoyed Assault on Dragon Keep's tabletop trappings and the duality of a game within a game. The team felt it had only scratched the surface of exploring what it could do in a fantasy setting with looter-shooter mechanics.

"It became pretty obvious to us very, very early that it could be so much more than just an add-on to another game," creative director Matt Cox says. "With the fantasy looter-shooter and the character of Tiny Tina, the ceiling was way higher and just really deserved its own standalone treatment."

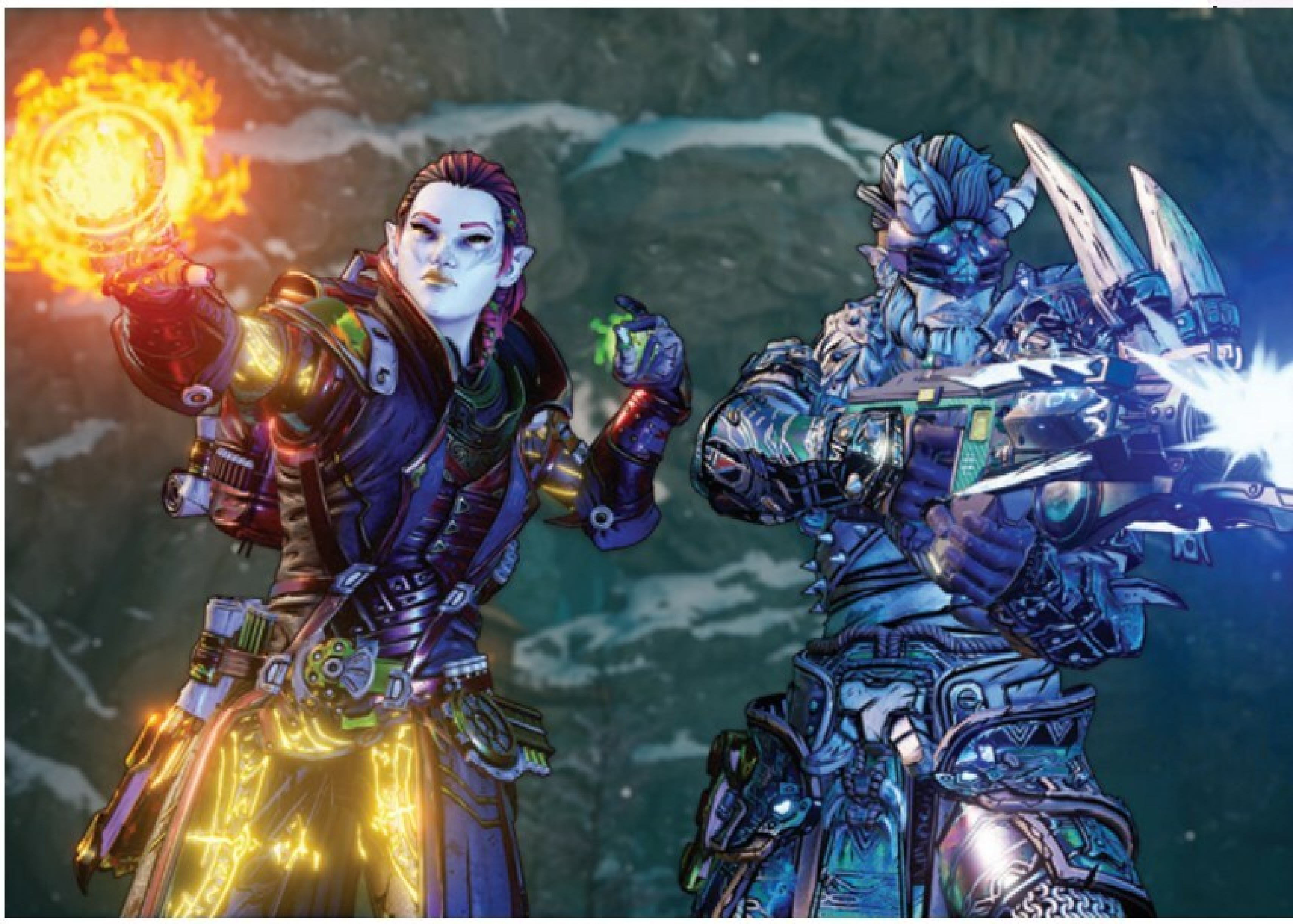
Gearbox wants this new effort to deliver all the unique experiences of the Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep DLC, but with a lower barrier-to-entry. Since this is a standalone story, players can enter Wonderlands with no knowledge of Borderlands' lore or backstory. However, existing fans could notice various nods to established characters in the Borderlands world.

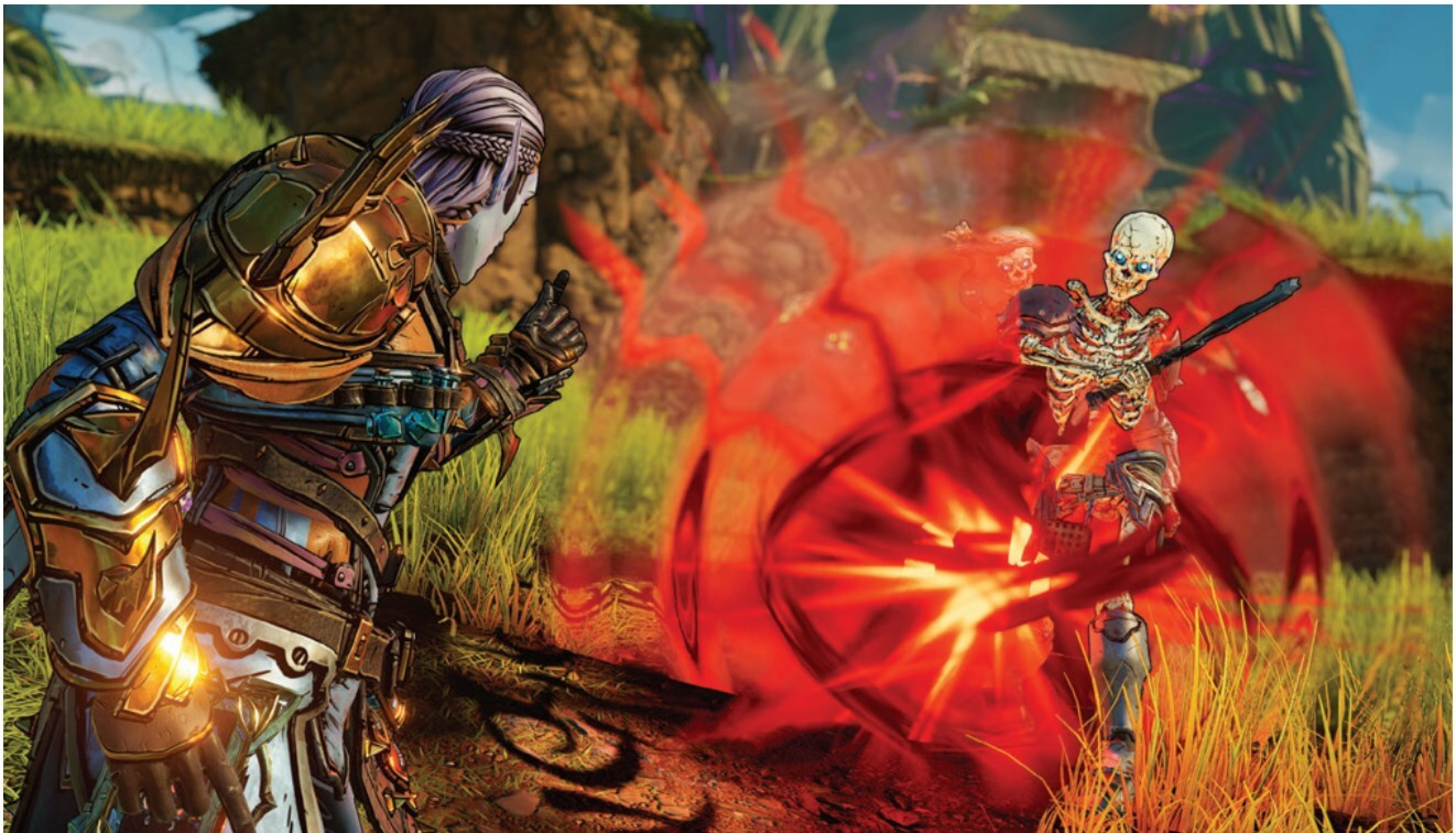
Despite being a standalone adventure, Tiny Tina's Wonderlands retains many of the conventions and mechanics players have grown familiar with, while expanding on them in several fun ways. Wonderlands takes place in a D&D-like realm, but guns are still front and center. New gun types lean into the fantasy elements, with magic barrels you reload by sprinkling fairy dust and crossbow bolts that multiply their damage based on how many bolts you stick in an enemy.

However, combat encounters are more diverse affairs, as spells play a prominent role. Spells change the way you approach encounters significantly and work in conjunction with the fun gunplay and wild weaponry Borderlands fans are already familiar with. Now, in addition to blasting enemies away with the latest and greatest loot you picked up, you can open fissures in the ground, summon pets to fight alongside you, and even cast protection enchantments for you and your allies. These spells act like the main series' grenades in that you have a dedicated equipment slot and button for them, but they operate on a cooldown and have a wide array of effects.

"We knew we wanted to update that looter-shooter loop to something that's a little bit more unique to the idea of this fantasy world, and we thought these spells were an absolutely great way to move that forward," senior producer Kayla Belmore says. "We really want them to feel powerful and like an action skill. This allowed the guns to still really shine and be the stars of the show, but have an alternate part of the combat that felt really special and unique. And you know, who doesn't love summoning giant meteors from the sky and squishing your enemies?"

Melee also receives an upgrade in Wonderlands' combat system. No longer meant as a last resort if an enemy gets too close, melee weapons now get their own specialized gear slot. Melee weapons can be picked up as loot, and they have different attributes that allow you to synergize and tailor your combat style to the way you want to play. I had the chance to see all these grand ambitions come together in a cohesive way when I fired up a prerelease build of Tiny Tina's Wonderlands.





GETTING CREATIVE

The differences in gameplay in Tiny Tina's Wonderlands go much deeper than spells and upgraded melee weapons. The gameplay structure combines the team's inspiration from RPGs and the tried-and-true Borderlands formula.

Right out of the gate, players will notice that they now create their own characters rather than the Borderlands convention of giving you four established characters from which to choose. While I didn't get the opportunity to create my own, the two characters I played looked and sounded very different from one another.

In this new creator, players can choose different personalities before selecting from two voiceprints and adjusting the pitch via a slider. Because the six character classes are separate from looks, Gearbox is excited to give players the opportunity to not have the character's identity be tied so tightly to their play style. This notion was carried over from inspirations like Dungeons & Dragons, other fantasy games, and even JRPGs. But at its core, this shift from the main series was the team wanting to empower the player to play who they want.

"Allowing the player to express themselves was something very important to a lot of people on the team," Belmore says. "We really want players to be able to represent themselves, their fantasy self, or something completely outlandish if they feel like it. It's all up to them and what they want to see and what they want to do. That's really special for us."

As you level up, each character has skill trees and hero stats to upgrade. Skill trees play out much like standard Borderlands progression. Meanwhile, hero stats allow you to upgrade typical RPG stats: strength (critical hit damage), dexterity (critical hit chance), intelligence (spell cooldown), and more. In my playthrough, I was landing a ton of headshots, so I poured a lot of my hero points into strength to boost the damage.

My gameplay session takes place on Mount Craw, a snowy mountain full of caves, cliffs, and critters. If you're hoping for some goblins and trolls to fight amid this game's fantasy setting, my time in Mount Craw offers plenty. I can choose between two classes in this build, but there will be a total of six in the final version. While the Graveborn build gives me some great dark magic and a Demi-Lich companion, I love the Stabbomancer class, which allows me to summon magical whirling blades that deal persistent damage to enemies in the area.

Regardless of how important spells and melee are to the overall equation, I immediately see what the team means when it says that guns are still the star of the show. Blasting through goblins (who all have their own weird weapons and powers) is so much fun, thanks to the interesting arsenal I pick up along the way. From an automatic scoped rifle that fires arrows to an SMG that launches area-of-effect bombs and restores some of your health with each successful shot, the Borderlands pedigree is alive and well, even in a fantasy setting.

TALES FROM THE WONDERLANDS

Borderlands games have always allowed players to see their co-op partners' characters, but with more customization options available to players, Gearbox gives you more opportunities to marvel at your creation. One such opportunity comes through an overworld, which lets you walk about in third-person view, an idea Cox says was taken from old-school JRPGs and classics like Zelda II: The Adventure of Link.

That's not the only difference carried over by way of the JRPG genre, as players can enter the tall grass in the overworld and engage in random encounters that reward you with loot and experience. When a random encounter occurs, you are pushed back into first-person view, and you battle the enemies just as you would in a standard mission.

Bringing an All-Star Cast to the Table

Celebrity Dungeons & Dragons campaigns have become more popular in recent years thanks to shows like *Critical Role*, and Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is set to give players the experience of role-playing alongside beloved comedic actors. Ashly Burch reprises her role as the titular Tiny Tina, but she's joined by Will Arnett (*Arrested Development*, *Lego Batman*) as the antagonistic Dragon Lord, Andy Samberg (*Saturday Night Live*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*) as Captain Valentine, and Wanda Sykes (*Black-ish*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*) as Frette.

Like Borderlands games, Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is fully co-op. But even if you're playing solo, Gearbox leverages this all-star cast to make you feel like you're not alone. "The whole idea with this game is that it should feel, even if you're playing all by yourself, like you're in a campaign, playing a tabletop game with your friends," senior producer Kayla Belmore says. "There's a lot of fun that can be had when you're listening to this banter and how everyone is interacting. Developing at a time when we were all really isolated, having this moment where you can be alone and still feel like you're playing with friends is something I think can be relatable for a lot of people."

This overworld encourages exploration to allow you to fully experience the world of Tiny Tina's Wonderlands. In addition to overworld-specific quests, you can even discover completely new maps to explore and complete missions. For instance, the Mount Craw map I play is not a part of the main plotline. Instead, you discover that through the overworld. Once you're in Mount Craw, you have a self-contained storyline connected to the environment and its inhabitants. Mount Craw is just one example of these side maps that offer major quests for players that supplement the overall story and lore of the Wonderlands but are standalone in nature.

As you find these extra maps, you'll notice more sidequests available in the hub world. For example, as you discover Mount Craw, you may start seeing "wanted" posters around the tavern for characters in that area. You can start quests by exploring in the Wonderlands, talking to NPCs, or by simply picking up notes at the tavern, making it so players have many opportunities to find this side content, then engage with it if they want.

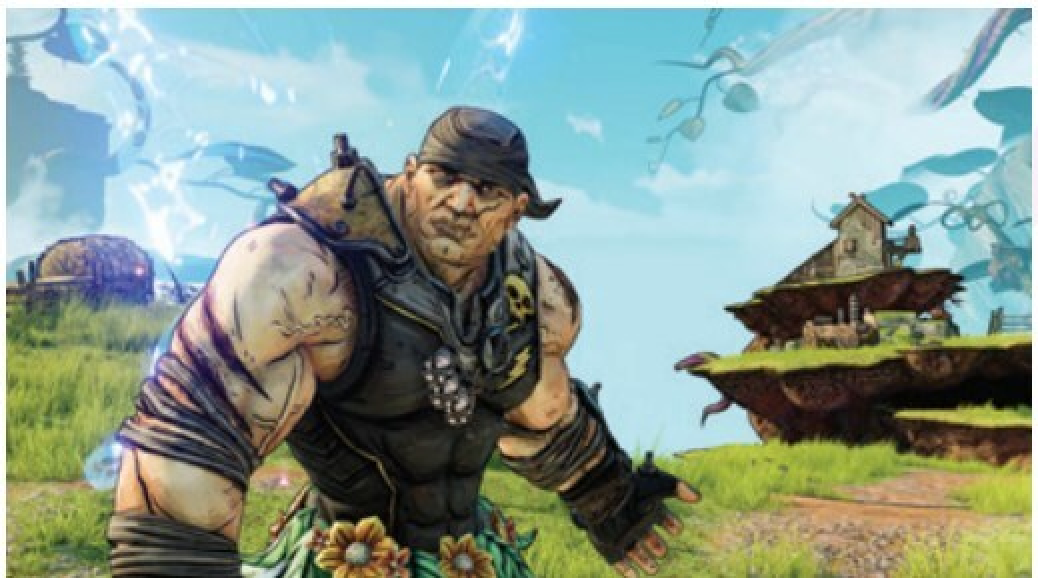
In my time exploring Mount Craw, I meet Jar, a small goblin fighting to free her enslaved race. To help her, I need to free prisoners, secure bombs, blow up a gate, and defeat a frost skeleton. Then I have to plunge his heart into a forge to freeze it, defeat powerful magic-wielding oracles, and finally take down a mechanical dragon in a tense boss fight. While that's the main questline in this standalone map, I can also take on sidequests, like helping Claptrap (made of wood) collect ore to use in his forge. Assisting Jar and freeing her fellow goblins is certainly the highlight, but this early build gives me hope for the sheer breadth of quest-driven content in the final game.

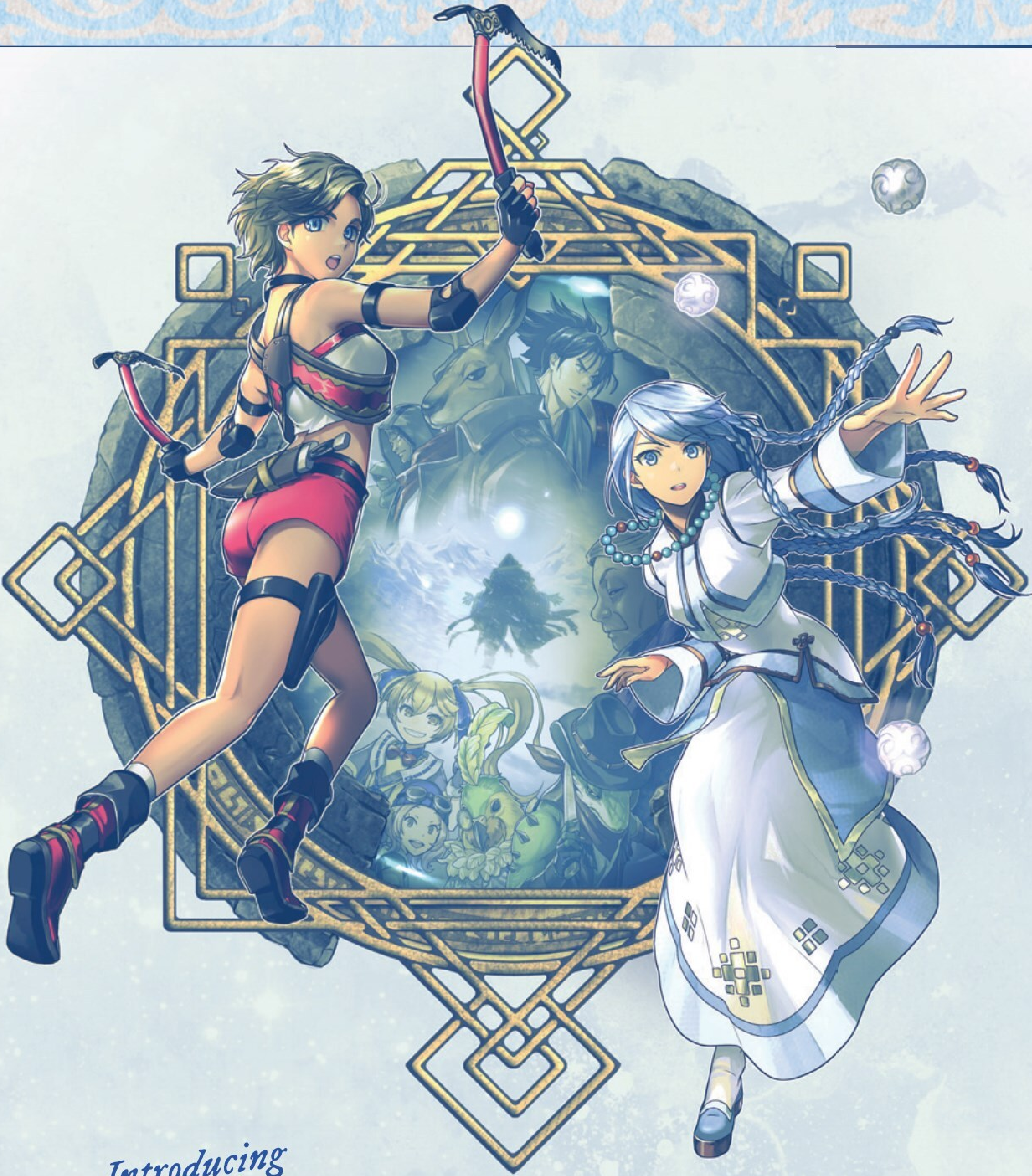
With so much available to players at any given time, Gearbox has implemented a new system to ensure players cannot out-level quests. In Tiny Tina's Wonderlands, if you return to a quest you picked up in the game's early stages, the challenge levels with you. This provides commensurate rewards, making it both engaging and worthwhile to the player regardless of how much stronger they became in the time since accepting the quest.

ROLLING THE DICE

After Borderlands 3 gave players another Vault-hunting adventure in 2019, a game that shakes up the formula could be a perfect opportunity to energize the fan base. Tiny Tina has clearly demonstrated her staying power within both the franchise and the community at large, so thrusting her into the spotlight in perhaps the most chaotic and over-the-top game Gearbox has ever developed sounds like a match made in heaven.

I had a blast exploring Mount Craw and experimenting with the various guns, spells, and melee weapons. I can't wait to see what else Tiny Tina's Wonderlands has in store for me when the game launches later this month. ■

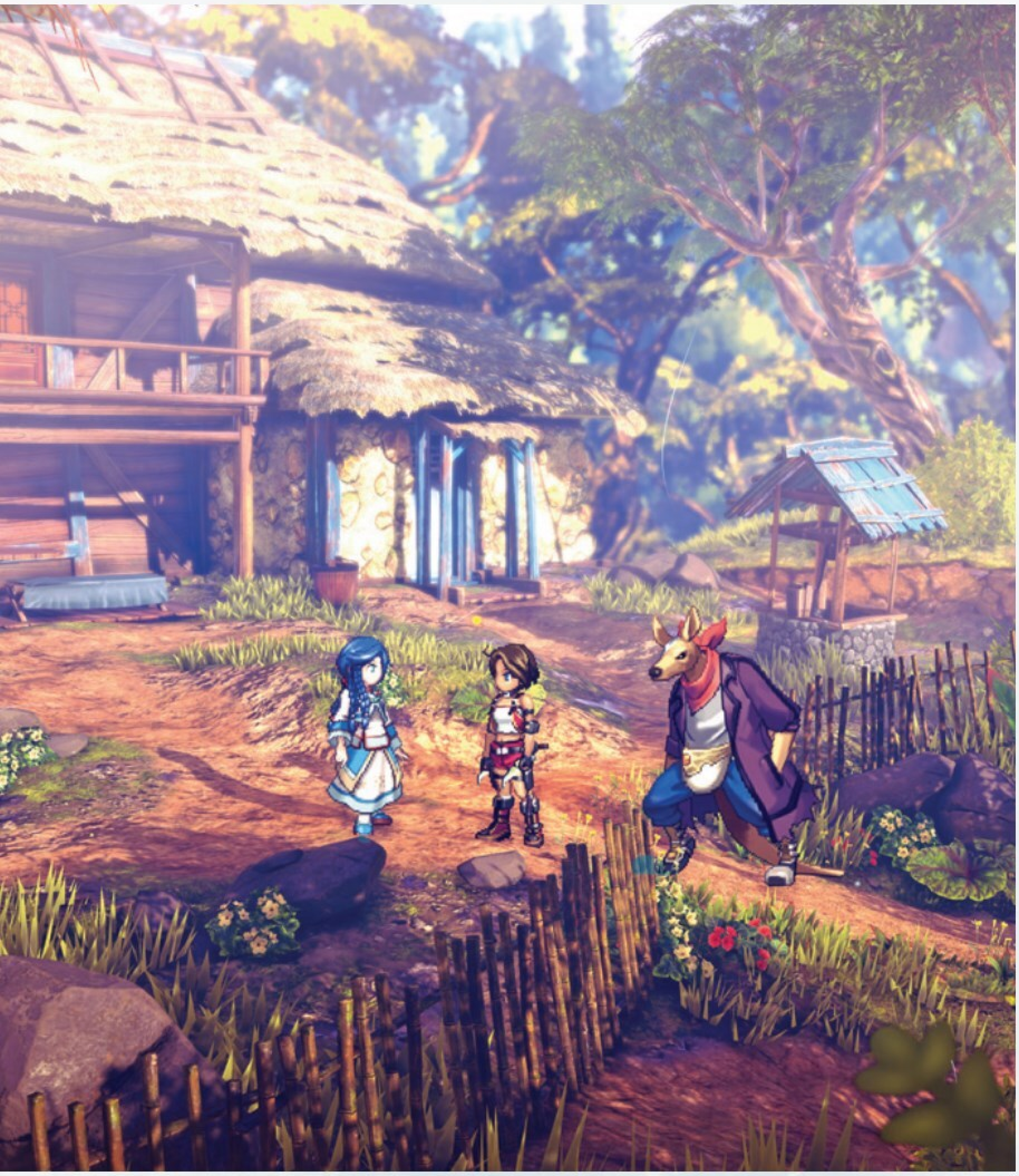




Introducing a SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

A look at how Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising bridges JRPG history with a brand-new franchise

BY JILL GRODT

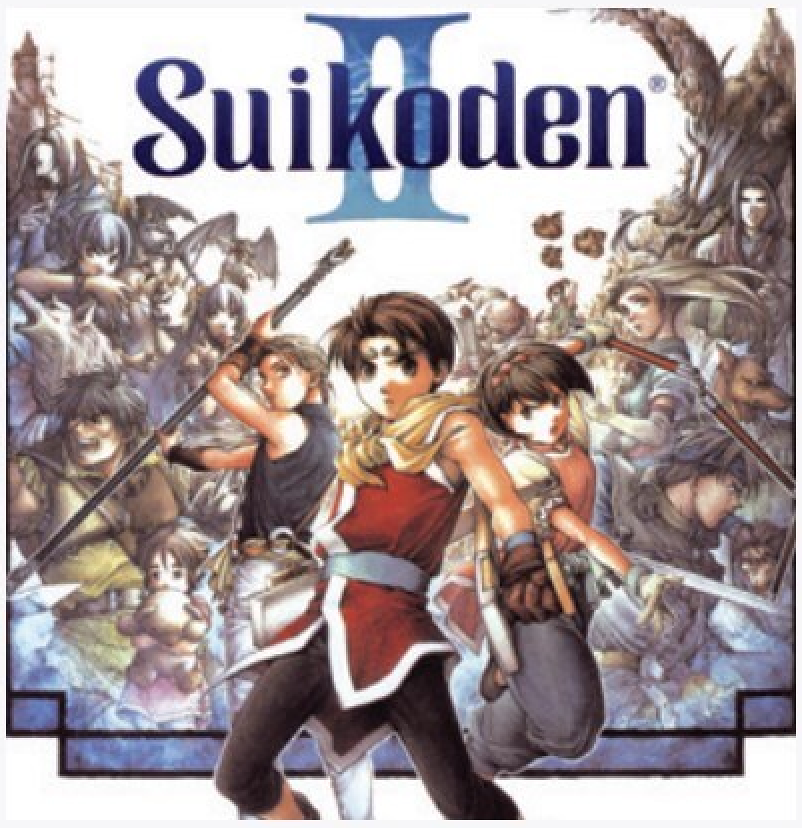


Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising is a town-building game with real-time combat that serves as a prologue to Rabbit and Bear Studios' anticipated JRPG, Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes. That's the easy elevator pitch for the game, anyway. But understanding what's really packed into that sentence means following the studio's lead members back through almost three decades of JRPG history.

Rabbit and Bear Studios' Yoshitaka Murayama, Junko Kawano, and Osamu Komuta all played pivotal roles in molding a beloved and influential series in the genre, Suikoden. Though it didn't invent the concepts, the now-discontinued franchise helped popularize character recruitment and base-building in JRPGs, something we see now in many modern titles.

Rising, coming later this year, will introduce fans to the next chapter in a long and storied history that spans its creators' trail-blazing past to the studio's recent overwhelmingly successful Kickstarter. To walk through that history and get new details on the upcoming title, we talked with several of the game's lead creators. The team answered questions about Rising's roots and revealed all-new information, like a previously unknown character and how the forthcoming Eiyuden titles connect to each other. But before jumping ahead to the future, let's travel back to Konami in the mid-'90s, where future Eiyuden Chronicle leaders established a celebrated JRPG series.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER 505 Games **DEVELOPER** Rabbit and Bear Studios **RELEASE** 2022



Chronicle of the Past

Murayama and Kawano first worked together at Konami on a project that never made it out of development. The duo didn't have long to brood over this as the company soon put them together again. This time, they'd work with a small team to create a game for the recently released PlayStation console. They settled on making a role-playing game that would eventually become Suikoden. However, being a new face on the RPG scene had its challenges, making the venture feel like a gamble. The project faced overwhelming competition from established franchises like Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest, which cast a long shadow.

Suikoden, a title inspired by classical Chinese literature and popular manga alike, follows characters torn between personal loyalty, civil duty, and destiny. The interweaving of political intrigue, the machinations of power, and human struggles are as familiar to fans of the series as its turn-based combat in which players lead a party of adventurers chosen from a massive cast. The recruitment system is a vital pillar of the experience, with each new member of your growing outfit, called the 108 Stars of Destiny, changing possible narratives and contributing something to your ever-expanding headquarters. Along with the Stars of Destiny, Suikoden also introduced the True Runes, which confer superhuman abilities on anyone that possesses them. The RPG may not have been an immediate financial success, but critical acclaim and word of mouth soon led to a passionate fanbase. Konami eventually realized it had a hit on its hands and greenlit a sequel, which would become many fans' favorite of the series.

Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising features real-time combat

Murayama, who led the team on Suikoden, Suikoden II, and most of Suikoden III, left Konami just before the third installment's release to become a freelance game creator. He founded Blue Moon Studio, where he experimented with the third-person shooter genre. The studio released 10,000 Bullets in 2005, but the title received an unenthusiastic reception, and by 2017, Murayama was back in the RPG realm. Collaborating with developer Cattle Call, he acted as the writer for The Alliance Alive. While the partnership was only temporary, Murayama took something away from the project as well his forays into another genre. "All of my previous work, not just Suikoden," Murayama says, "has been a source of inspiration for the current Eiyuden Chronicle. The most impressive thing about it is the variety of worlds created by the many characters with different personalities, positions, ideas, and goals."

Meanwhile, Kawano stepped into a leadership role for the Suikoden franchise after Muryama's departure. She wore many hats while producing Suikoden IV, helping with writing, designing, and other vital tasks. She would do the same for 2005's Suikoden Tactics, which she worked on with future Eiyuden Chronicle colleague Komuta, before switching to other projects within Konami. The Suikoden series continued developing titles until Konami announced the franchise's dedicated team had been disbanded in 2011. Kawano left the company a few years later.

A New Start

Fans of the Suikoden series had little hope of another game. The last entry, a PSP spin-off called Tsumugareshi Hyakunen no Toki, released in Japan in 2012. However, the title never got the official localization treatment, and Konami seemed uninterested in pursuing a franchise with dwindling financial success and popularity. After almost a decade with no word on a Suikoden title, the fanbase's fading flicker of hope erupted into a roaring bonfire when a Kickstarter project popped up from Suikoden's original makers in July of 2020, presenting a game that seemed to be a spiritual successor to the old series.

Just a few months earlier, Murayama had established a new company called Rabbit and Bear Studios. The Tokyo-based studio was formed so that its developers could have the agency to build the worlds they wanted. But Murayama also had the fans in mind, promising always to keep the players' interests at heart. With these guiding principles, the studio looked towards its first project, a JRPG in the vein of the PlayStation-era Suikoden games. To accomplish this goal, Murayama enlisted the help of several past Suikoden team members.

Kawano came on board as the game's character designer, making this the first time the pair had worked together on a project in over two decades. Lead system designer and director Osamu Komuta – who previously contributed to Suikoden Tierkreis and Suikoden Tactics – also joined the duo, along with Junichi Murakami, of Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow fame, who would oversee art direction. With a small group of creators ready to help make the studio's vision come to life, the team moved on to funding the game.

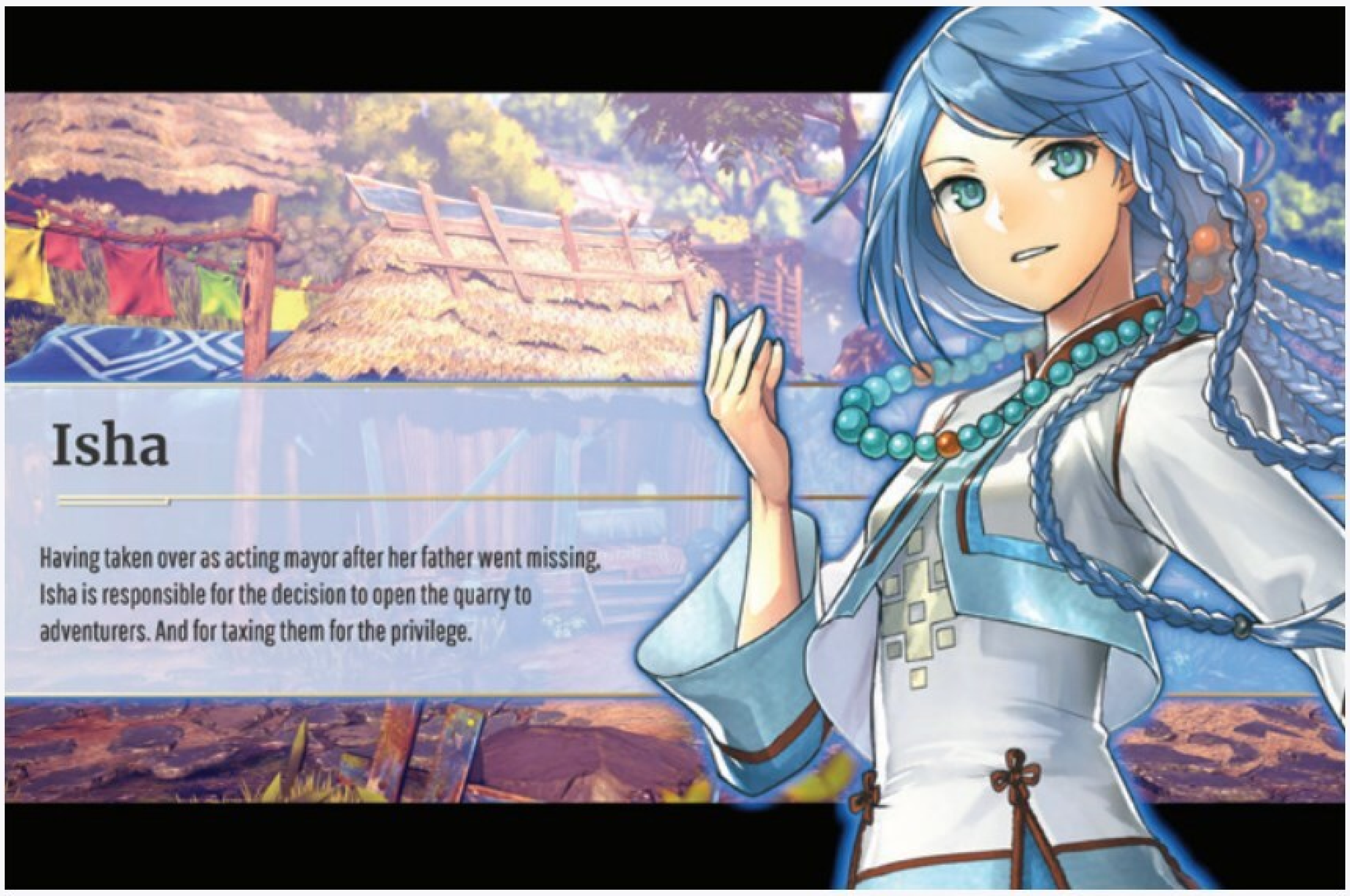
Rabbit and Bear Studios

In July 2020, Rabbit and Bear Studios went live with a Kickstarter campaign for Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes. The crowdfunding platform attracted the developers because it allowed them to follow the studio's mission statement. "One of the purposes of Eiyuden Chronicle," Murayama explains, "is for the creators themselves to have liberty and responsibility for the content of the game." Kickstarter provided a way for Rabbit and Bear to that retain agency over the game and involve the fans.

And involved they were.

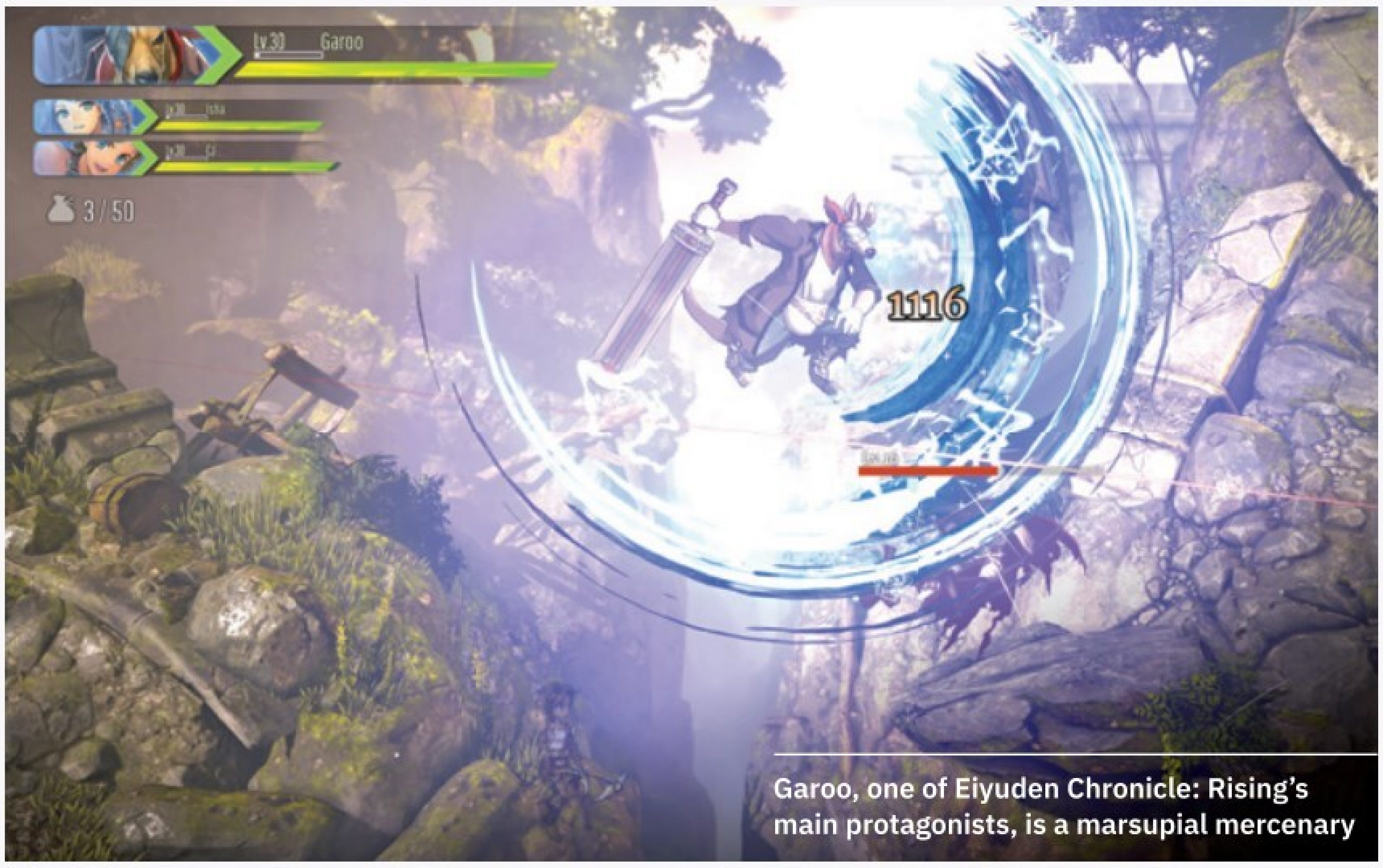
The Kickstarter for Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes hit its funding goal, $500,000, within the first three hours. JRPG fans flocked to the campaign, attracted by its promises of "An epic experience from the creators of classic JRPGs, with an intricate story and a gigantic cast of characters," and "a hybrid art style that mixes handmade pixel art with a modern 3D world." Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes' Kickstarter also gave backers a chance to feel like a hero from their favorite title. Over 46,000 pledges poured in over the Kickstarter's month-long run, totaling more than $4 million.

But backers have provided even more to the project than just funding, according to Murayama. When asked whether the team had taken any feedback from the Kickstarter community into account for Eiyuden Chronicle, he explains the community's opinions were "very significant." "The Kickstarter project allowed us to get user feedback much earlier than regular production, so we were able to refer to it in the planning stage," Murayama says.



Isha

Having taken over as acting mayor after her father went missing, Isha is responsible for the decision to open the quarry to adventurers. And for taxing them for the privilege.



Garoo, one of Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising's main protagonists, is a marsupial mercenary

Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising

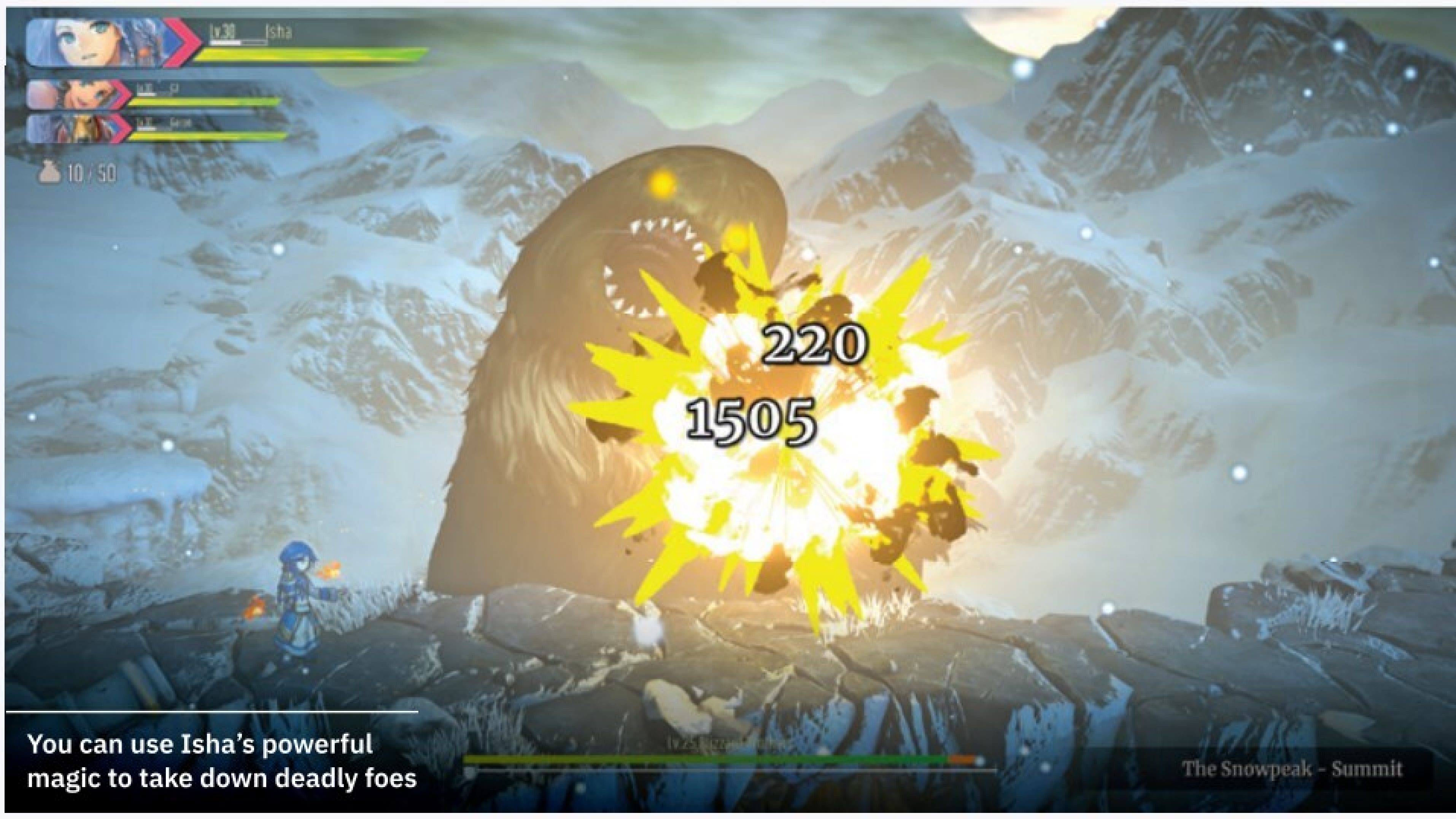
Before the campaign came to a close, Rabbit and Bear Studios threw one more stretch goal onto the ever-growing pile called "A Quiet Place." The goal proposed that if the project earned several million dollars, the creators would collaborate with Natsume-Atari on another RPG connected to Hundred Heroes but focused on town creation. Like all the other goals before it, the fans smashed through the requirements, and Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising was born.

The ambitious objective surprised many, so we asked Murayama what prompted the idea of a companion game. "With the development timeline through Kickstarter," he says, "it would take a while from the announcement of the title to its release. Therefore, we were looking for a possible way to show part of the appeal before the main game released."

Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising started as a vague concept, thanks to its unusual origin. The initial update for backers communicated that Rising would release before the main project, feature a series of mini-games that would feed the overall city building aspect, introduce a few characters that would appear in Hundred Heroes, and change up the combat. Fans got the first real sense of what all this meant during E3 2021 at the end of a trailer showing off Rabbit and Bear's main project. The seconds-long footage spotlighted a kangaroo-like figure swinging a large sword in real-time combat. The trailer confirmed that Rising would be coming the following year and that the title's visual style and combat system would significantly diverge from Hundred Heroes.

"Unlike the main story," Murayama says, "Rising is a smaller scale title." This not only allowed the team to offer a game to players who would otherwise be waiting for years to see any results of their support but also influenced Rising's uncharacteristic mechanics and combat. "The production time was limited," he continues, "and we selected a format that would allow players to have fun within it."

There were, however, fans who had major concerns about Rising. Whether it was simply that the game was too unlike the project they had backed or that Rising might divert resources from Hundred Heroes, players didn't shy from voicing their opinions. But Murayama is confident in the ongoing development. "Rising is planned and produced independently by Natsume Atari," he assures those concerned about Hundred Heroes getting put on the backburner, "which is a separate team from the main production team of Eiyuden Chronicle. But don't worry, each team is doing their best for both Rising and the main story."



You can use Isha's powerful magic to take down deadly foes

Speaking more on the development process and what it's been like to steer the Eiyuden projects toward their destinations, Murayama is clear that although both operate largely in separate spheres, each team is consistently working together. "For Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising, R&B is in charge of the worldview supervision and character design," Murayama says, "while the game planning and production are handled by Natsume Atari, and the story is handled by an external writer, Tadashi Satomi. Rising was led by Natsume Atari, and R&B quality checks for inconsistencies. I pay the most attention to the existence of the rune lens in the worldview and the various tribes living within the world."

World of Rising

With Rising's release date slated for this year, the game's creators gave us a glimpse of its world. Set several months before the events of Hundred Heroes, Rising will introduce players to rune lenses, powerful objects sought by adventurers far and wide, and a shadowy intrigue that will spill over into and set the stage for the next Eiyuden Chronicle title. "That war is not very present yet," Murayama says, referencing the struggle that will consume Hundred Heroes' plot. "Rising has its own story that stands alone in a unique way."

Rising's narrative will follow three primary protagonists: CJ, Isha, and Garoo. Taking cues from the Suikoden playbook, none of the characters begin on precisely the same page. Some come to the game's central location, New Never, to explore the dangerous but treasure-filled Runebarrows nearby. Others are bound closely to the city by family ties. But as the story continues, the heroes find reasons to work together to revitalize the earthquake-ravaged town by searching for resources and magical rune lenses.

"CJ, who takes pride in her family as a treasure hunter, and Isha, the acting mayor of New Never, are both 16-year-old girls, and Garoo, the beast mercenary who will help them, is a gruff, middle-aged man," Satomi said at last year's Tokyo Game Show. "They are all seeking the treasure of the ruins for their own purposes, and after much struggling, they eventually become reliable treasure hunters. CJ is a speed fighter, Garoo is a power warrior, and Isha is a wizard, and the game is played by switching between these three as the situation demands."

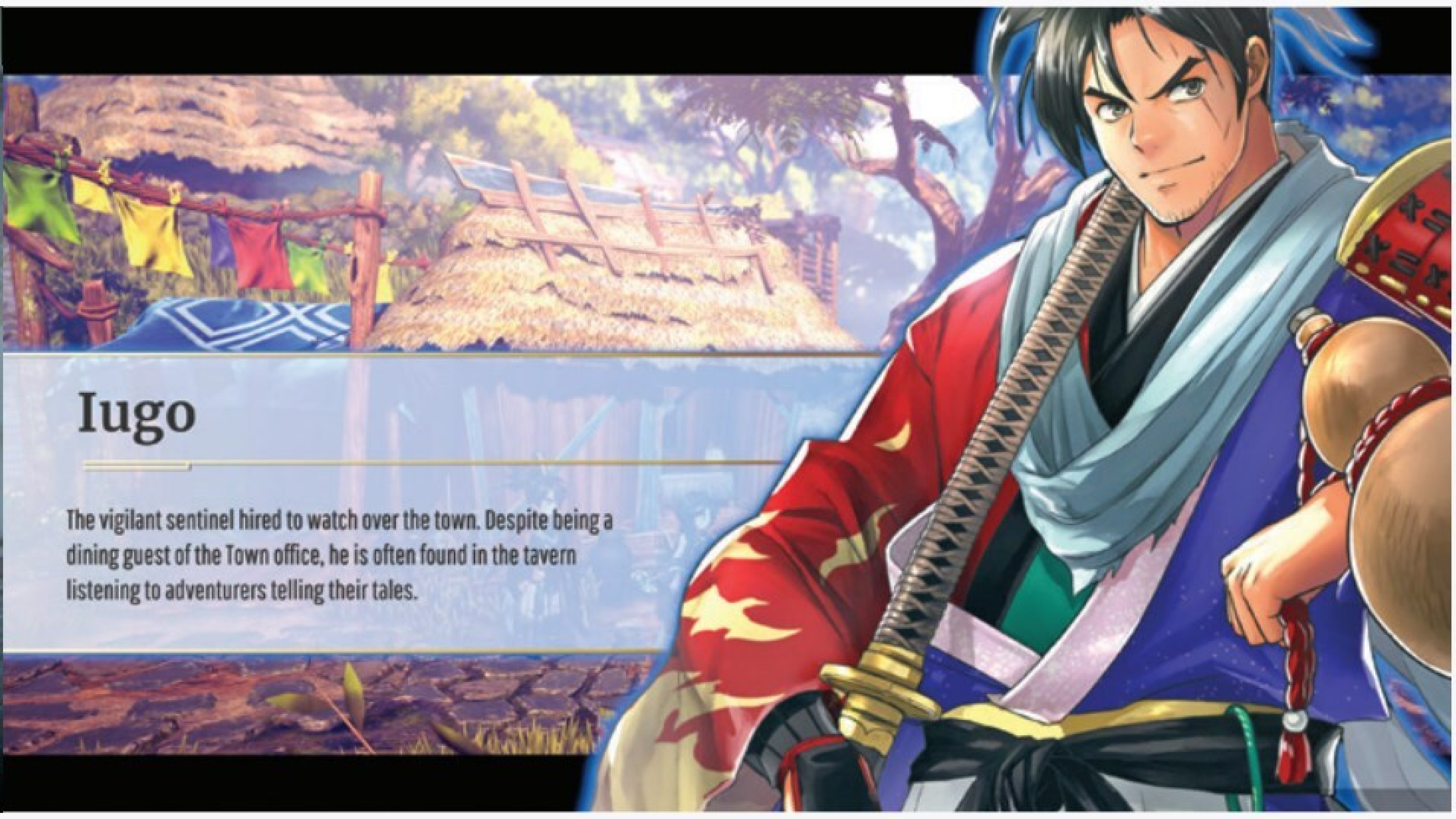
While Kawano hopes fans enjoy all of the characters' looks, she seems to have a soft spot for the aging marsupial mercenary. "I had fun drawing Garoo," Kawano says. Her past games have included a wide range of anthropomorphized animals, but Kawano admits Rising gave her a new first in her long career: the chance to draw a kangaroo person. The unusual opportunity coupled with the character's extraordinary concept made Garoo one of her favorite character designs in the companion game.

The 20-hour-long title will also focus on building up a central location, with much of the gameplay loop serving some purpose towards this end. New Never will play a crucial role in the story and, like the team's past titles, will influence the players' experience. Developer Natsume Atari explains that players can develop and expand the city over the course of their playthrough, causing it to alter significantly. Some of this development is baked into the game's story, with the protagonists' goals eventually interweaving with the town's success. Players will be able to create more buildings and shops, which will attract more people who will in turn help transform the town.

Meet Iugo

Besides the treasure-seeking CJ, hardened Garoo, and magical Isha, Rabbit and Bear Studios revealed another, never-before-seen character coming to the Eiyuden Chronicle series: Iugo. Also carrying over to the main story, players will first meet Iugo as he joins the cast of characters in Rising. This means we can get to know this character long before he arrives in Hundred Heroes, seeing the foundation for Iugo's story laid down before the war in the next entry breaks out.

The confident and colorful-looking character appears ready for battle. He sports a sword that's almost as long as he is tall and pieces of armor on his legs, arm, and shoulder that wouldn't be out of place in feudal Japan. In his left hand, Iugo grasps a drinking gourd, and though we don't see what's inside, the slightly mischievous expression on his face hints that the character might party as hard as he fights. There is also a vibrant play of hues



Iugo

The vigilant sentinel hired to watch over the town. Despite being a dining guest of the Town office, he is often found in the tavern listening to adventurers telling their tales.

in his outfit, which features a kaleidoscope of colors that suggest a lively personality.

According to Kawano, Iugo was a character already rattling around in Murayama's mind when she started designing him. "For Iugo, there was more feedback than for other characters," Kawano says, "such as the sword he carries, the gourd, and the color of his kimono. I think Murayama-san had already imagined Iugo as this person. So, for this character, I tried my best to materialize the request rather than inspiration!"

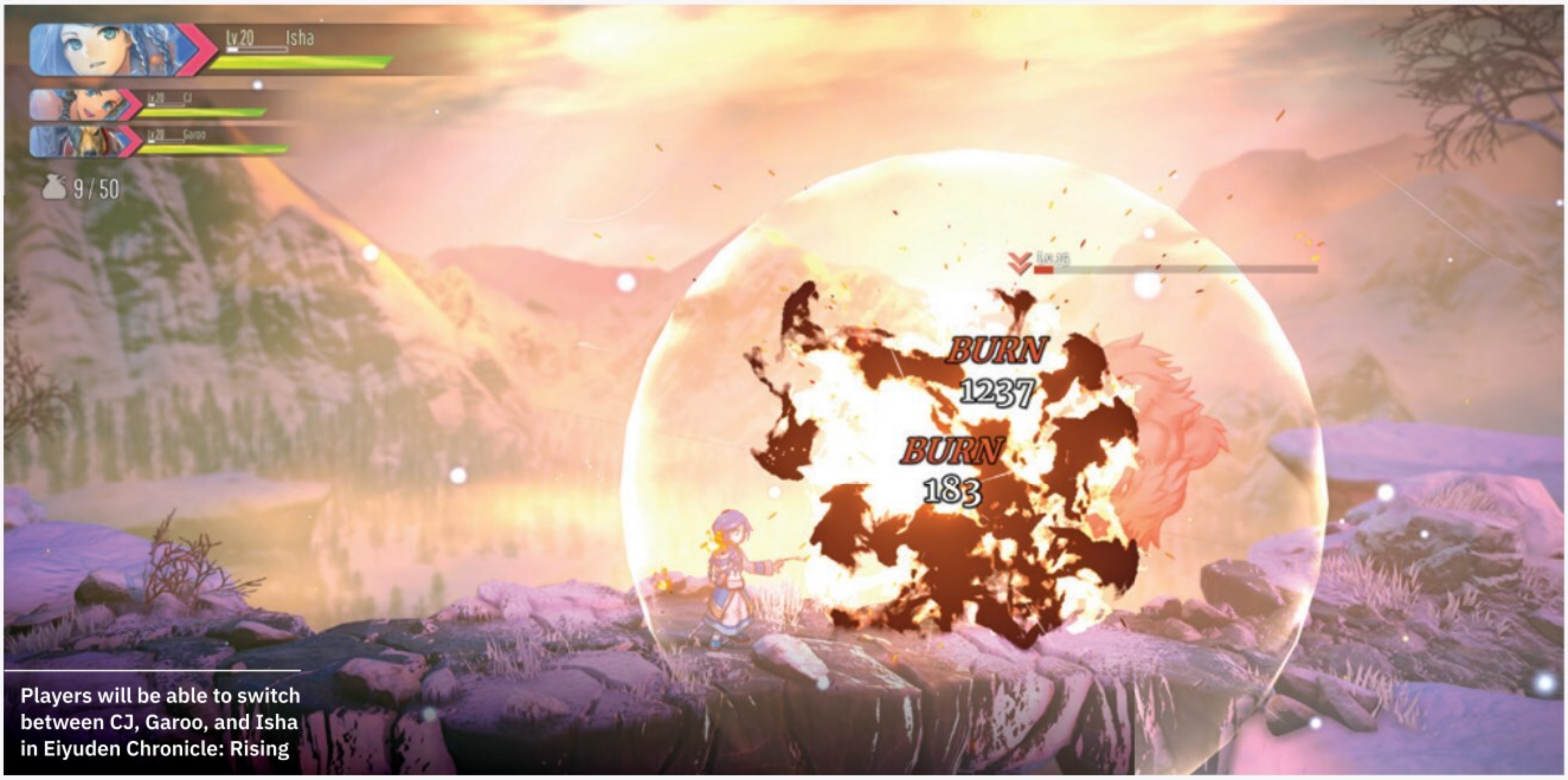
Though Iugo is the first new Rising character the team has revealed, Kawano assures players that they can look forward to meeting more in the upcoming adventure. She explains that there are many interesting and distinct characters in addition to the swordsman, treasure hunter, mercenary, and acting New Never mayor who will impact the Eiyuden titles.

Rising is Only the Beginning

As a prelude to Hundred Heroes, Rising will serve to set up a lot of the second release's lore, some of its central struggles, and act as an entry point to Rabbit and Bear's main adventure. Fans can expect a lot of cross-over between the two titles, but they won't have to play through the companion game just to understand Hundred Heroes.

"We hope that as many people as possible will play Rising because it has a wonderful story," says Komuta, "but naturally, there will be a few people who will not play it. For those that don't play Rising, you won't miss out on the fun in Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes. However, there are some transferable elements that will make people who have played Rising giggle, so I think they will be able to get more into the main story."

Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising debuts later this year on PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC, with Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes following in 2023. The creators hope that this bite-sized companion game will give the people that supported their vision, and all the players interested in checking out the Suikoden spiritual successor, a fun experience to tide them over while the team continues development on the studio's primary game. Though the town creation title differs considerably from its anticipated counterpart, Murayama, when asked whether Rising would be a good indication of what to expect in Hundred Heroes, simply replies, "I'm hoping for that." ■



Players will be able to switch between CJ, Garoo, and Isha in Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising

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LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

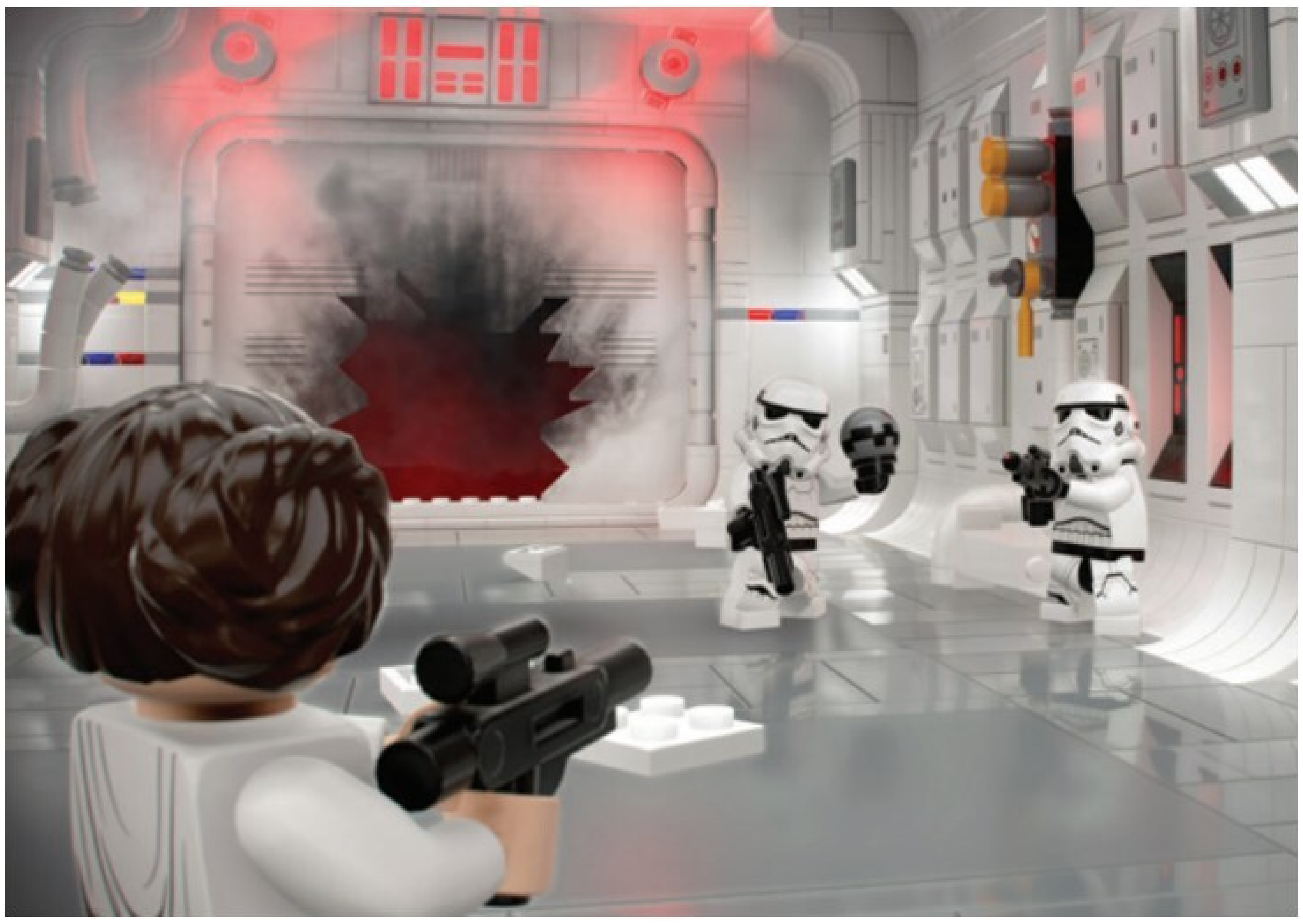
A star tour de force

After more than 30 Lego games in almost half as many years, TT Games needed to rethink its formula. After the release of The Lego Movie 2 Videogame in 2019, the developer went back to the drawing board, designing what it believes is the ultimate Lego Star Wars project. The result is a fresh take on Lego games that should remain inviting to fans of all ages.

The Skywalker Saga includes content from all nine mainline episodic Star Wars films. From the start screen, players are free to jump into content from any one of the trilogies. So you may choose to watch Anakin Skywalker's rise and fall among the Jedi, join Luke and his Rebel friends in their fight against the Empire, or tag along with Rey as she tries to learn her own last name. Players can bounce between these stories as much as they want. Outside of story missions, you're free to explore side quests and find collectibles on up to 24 different planets, each with its own open-world hub, including the Ewok villages of Endor, the sprawling cityscape of Coruscant, and the vast oceans of Naboo.

During a hands-off demo, we went back to Star Wars' beginnings with Episode IV – A New Hope. Thankfully, TT Games' unique brand of absurdist humor remains in full swing. The episode opens with two droids that look like C-3PO and R2-D2 running down a hall as an Imperial Star Destroyer attacks their ship. However, when a large piece of debris collapses on top of the two droids, the camera shifts over and starts following the real C-3PO and R2-D2. Later, we see a Rebel fighter run down a corridor while jamming out to the Star War's soundtrack on a pair of headphones. As the droids look for an escape pod, we notice a group of Storm Trooper enjoying a soak in a hot tub in one of the pod bays.

TT Games' humor hasn't changed, but its level design has. Not only has the studio lowered the camera to a behind-the-shoulder view, giving combat a more intimate feel, the team has also designed a series of missions full of branching paths. We watch Princess Leia avoid a group of Stormtroopers during one firefight by running down a hall and using a grapple point to zip up to another level on the ship. If you don't want to approach battles using the new third-person shooter controls, you can stealth around some firefights or blend in with the crowd by finding the proper outfit and dressing like the enemy.



Multi builds from Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens make a return, so at set points, players can choose between building one of two different machines, which changes a player's path through the level. For example, at one point, Leia discovers a pile of Lego and can either build a wrecking ball to smash through a cracked wall or a water turret to douse a fire blocking a different hallway. In these moments, players' choices open new areas, which may be filled with Lego studs and other collectibles.

In past Lego games, each character had unique abilities that helped them navigate the world. With The Skywalker Saga, TT Games has rethought character abilities. Now, each character fits into a class archetype, and every class shares the same set of specialties. For example, the scavenger class has access to various gear, such as a net launcher and a glider that lets characters float through the air. Meanwhile, protocol Droids understand every language and can talk to alien NPCs to get extra info that might unlock side quests. Both Jedi and Sith can use the Force to move objects around the environment, but only Sith can toss people around. Kyber Bricks, found scattered across each level, are used to upgrade class abilities, and once you unlock an ability in one class, it becomes available for every character in that class.

Many of The Skywalker Saga's hubs are full of vehicles, so players can take a landspeeder across the sand dunes of Tatooine or hop in an air taxi on Coruscant. However, vehicles aren't limited to a planet's atmosphere. Several of Saga's levels have players dogfighting around capital ships and cutting through waves of TIE fighters as they disable the guns on First Order Dreadnoughts.

It's been years since TT Games released a Lego Star Wars title, so we're eager to get our hands on The Skywalker Saga this April. TT Games' smart updates to its formula should give the new title a fresh feel even to those who have played every Lego game in the company's catalog. No matter which *Star Wars* trilogy is your personal favorite, this looks like the ultimate collection.

BY BEN REEVES

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Interactive
DEVELOPER TT Games **RELEASE** April 5

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Graveyard of horror

In Ghostwire: Tokyo, things are quickly going from bad to worse. Tokyo's citizens have almost entirely disappeared, replaced with various monsters that roam the streets. Per video game tradition, there's only one guy who can save the day. In this case, it's an unassuming man named Akito. Luckily for him, he's been possessed by a spirit named KK, who gives Akito supernatural powers. It's nonsense.

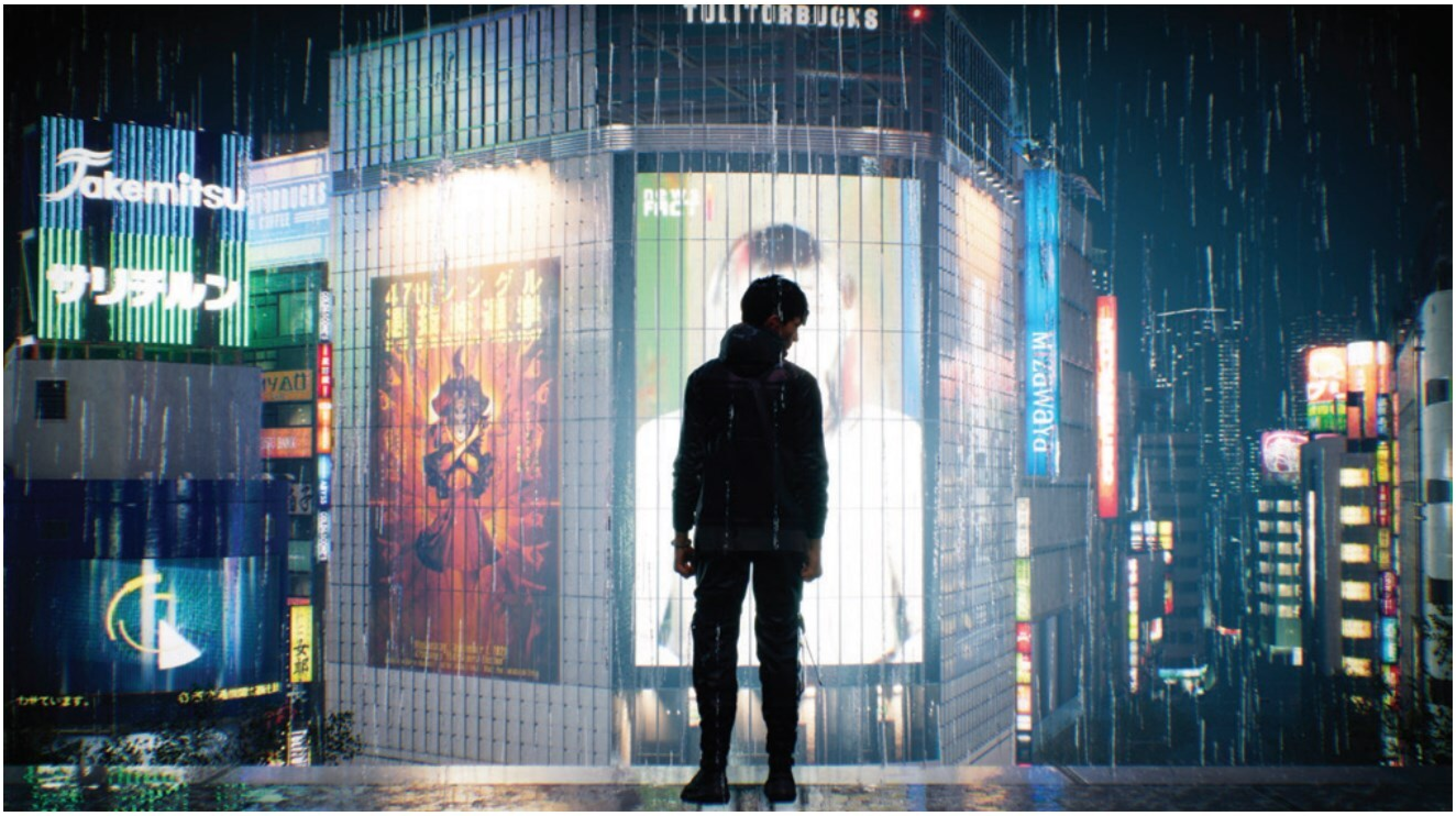
From what we've seen in preview footage, Ghostwire's story doesn't do much for me; it's relatively boilerplate and hammy. Not necessarily in a bad way, but not in a way that leaves me wanting to find out more. I do, however, want to know everything I can about Ghostwire's world.

Ghostwire's most immediate and unique hook is its modern take on yōkai (put simply: Japanese ghosts or spirits), called "Visitors." This isn't entirely a surprise; Tango Gameworks is developing the game, the maker of the Evil Within series, which also featured fantastic and terrifying art direction.

There are, of course, spirits you may expect. Disfigured monsters, such as a woman whose head only houses a giant, gaping maw, and Kuchisake-onna, the slit-mouthed woman, are rampant, calling back to famous and traditional images of Japanese folklore, but with a modern twist. Other creatures are more reminiscent of the "J-horror" film boom of the late '90s and 2000s. We see plenty of headless schoolchildren, long dark hair, and even a ghost in a yellow rainjacket, similar to the spirit in Hideo Nakata's 2002 film *Dark Water*. It's worth pointing out Nakata is most famous for his 1998 film *Ring*, which helped usher in the J-horror boom, received an American remake – 2002's *The Ring* – and paved the way, in part, for Ghostwire's particular brand of Japanese frights.

But most interesting is the contemporary influence Ghostwire pulls from: internet creepypasta. In early looks at the game, one of the more prominent spirits shown is a character resembling the Slender Man, a monster birthed in internet messaging boards that has since found a place in modern horror. Speaking to *Wired*, concept artist Kenta Muramatsu said these spirits, called "Rainwalkers," were influenced by the Noppera-bō yōkai, which disguises itself as a human and lacks a face. Taking that influence into account and considering the similarities to Slender Man's design, it's hard to not see the Rainwalkers, dressed in typical business suits, with creepy blank white heads, as a marriage of Japanese folklore and more modern internet-based horror. Whether or not there are other similar monsters or if this is an isolated example remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it's intriguing, and perhaps one of the only examples that comes to mind of a triple-A game pulling from new-age horror for its visual direction.

I can't think of a better reason to be excited for Ghostwire: Tokyo. Put simply; it doesn't look like other games coming out – especially other triple-A games. Ghostwire's style is uniquely its own. The broad strokes of its narrative might not do much for me, but the creatures within are more than enough to keep it high up in my most-anticipated list for 2022.



渋谷ぎんざ
止まれ
不審者
警戒中

Interestingly, however, especially considering Tango's previous games, Ghostwire isn't a horror game; it's an action-adventure. And while the game is filled with ghosts and spirits – some of them indeed scary – the game itself isn't meant to be an overall terrifying romp. Alongside the aforementioned Yōkai, Ghostwire also features its own take on spirit cats (which serve as the game's merchants), and others.

The open world housing these spirits also has me interested. While it's hard to get a sense of how big the map is, at least judging by limited pre-release trailers, parts of Shibuya have been meticulously recreated. Selfishly, I'd love to see something similar to the Kamurocho map in the Yakuza series, where the in-game ward is a near one-to-one recreation of its real-world counterpart's street layouts, building placements, and even shops and stores therein. But at the very least, I'll settle for the ability to grapple high above the Tokyo skyline, as shown off in Ghostwire's most recent trailer.

Ghostwire also looks fun. Its core mechanic, called "etherial weaving," combined with elemental powers, produces flashy and explosive combos, and I can't wait to roam Shibuya combining my various powers to devastating effect. There's been some criticism around the gameplay – both online and among the *Game Informer* staff – citing that it looks repetitive or not as engaging as the overall world. I don't share this opinion, but at the very least, it is hard to get a sense of Ghostwire's overall gameplay arc from the trailers. Walking around blasting creepy monsters may look fun in a 10 minute presentation, but after 12-or-more hours with not much else, then yeah, maybe those pre-release criticisms could have merit.

Ghostwire is almost here; it's set to be released on March 25 for PlayStation 5 and PC. That date can't come soon enough. I'm looking forward to seeing all its various horrors up close and personal when the game finally comes out. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Adventure **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Tango Gameworks
RELEASE March 25

HAVE A NICE DEATH

Death really needs a holiday

Players' first introduction to Have a Nice Death, a delightfully grim roguelike about, well, death, was at The Game Awards 2021, where its stunning, hand-drawn art style, irreverent tone, and fast-paced combat made it a stand-out trailer. The game, which enters Steam Early Access this month, asks players to slip on a tie, grab a scythe, and take on the role of Death Incorporated's CEO.

Unfortunately, Death finds the company increasingly difficult to steer, as it's filled with insubordinate employees wreaking the kind of havoc in the mortal world that's just not good for business. To set things straight and finally take a much-needed vacation, Death sets out to traverse the depths of his gloomy corporation and visit his top executives, called Sorrows, several of which players can encounter during this early release period. Using his trusty scythe and powerful spells, Death will get his company back on track or die trying.

Have a Nice Death is not unique in its setting or concept, as recent, award-winning titles like Death's Door and Hades both featured action-heavy combat and the afterlife. However, this doesn't worry the game's developer, Magic Design Studios. "We know that the roguelike genre is very overcrowded," says marketing coordinator and narrative designer Mérédith Alfroy. "But it was a personal choice. We all like this kind of game, and we wanted to offer this kind of experience to players."

"Have a Nice Death will offer a charming art style and a cute – but deadly – cast of characters," she continues. "We really wanted to focus on a very fast-paced, hack-and-slash combat with a unique take that also talked about working life and death, which was very fun."

Among that cast of characters are the big bads, the Sorrows. Lead game designer Simon Dutertre reveals one of them in detail: "Max is [a] nondisclosed Sorrow for now, but he is [a] very, very peculiar Sorrow because he's kind of mad – like very, very mad," he says. "He changes clothes every half second. So, he's very, very psychedelic."

Besides foes with wild wardrobe changes, players can look forward to exploring five different departments of Death Incorporated in Early Access, with each level containing its own unique Sorrow encounter, lower-tiered manager fights, and a whole slew of deadly minions. The first two levels are favorites for Dutertre and Alfroy, with the latter describing Death Incorporated's reception as "a big office ... that is very chaotic because there's piles and piles of paper, and files and souls everywhere." Meanwhile, Dutertre enjoys the second area, the pollution department, because it ups the challenge-level and forces players to draw on previously learned skills.

Both Alfroy and Dutertre are excited about this month's launch – and what comes later – though neither were willing to clarify what exactly players could expect when the game is officially released. But that is still some time away. Though available in Early Access on March 8, it will likely take another year, according to its creators, for Have a Nice Death's 1.0 launch. That leaves players with time to dive into the game's various departments, tackle life's Sorrows, and get a sense of what the final game will offer. "I hope that we will have good reactions," Alfroy says, "and we can't wait to work with the community as well to produce a game."

Currently, Have a Nice Death is only set to be released on PC. However, given the stir it made last year at The Game Awards, it's possible the indie will make it onto other platforms when it's released some time in 2023. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Perfect World Entertainment
DEVELOPER Magic Design Studios
RELEASE 2023 (Early Access March 8)

RUNE FACTORY 5

A new beginning

The Rune Factory series, a spin-off of Story of Seasons, combines action/RPG combat with its sibling's farming and social elements. Outside of its more fantastical bent, it made an impression with deeper mechanics than its farming-centric counterpart, giving players something to strive for beyond harvesting the perfect crop or wooing the romance candidate of their choice. Unfortunately, the road to a new Rune Factory game has been rocky and unpredictable, to say the least. Developer Neverland Co. closed its doors in 2013, filing for bankruptcy. But not all was lost, as series producer Yoshifumi Hashimoto opened his own studio, Hakama, to give the series new life. Now, almost a decade after Rune Factory 4's debut on 3DS, a new Rune Factory game is just around the corner as a Switch exclusive, and I recently went hands-on with the game to see what's in store.

Rune Factory 5 puts you in the role of a ranger who, true to the series' amnesiac plot lines, mysteriously arrives in a new town and doesn't remember much of anything. Your goal is to figure out your origins and the mysteries of the strange town of Rigbarth, which is being overrun by dangerous monsters. You can play as a male or female ranger, where your job is to solve the community's problems to build up your reputation and further grow your talents.

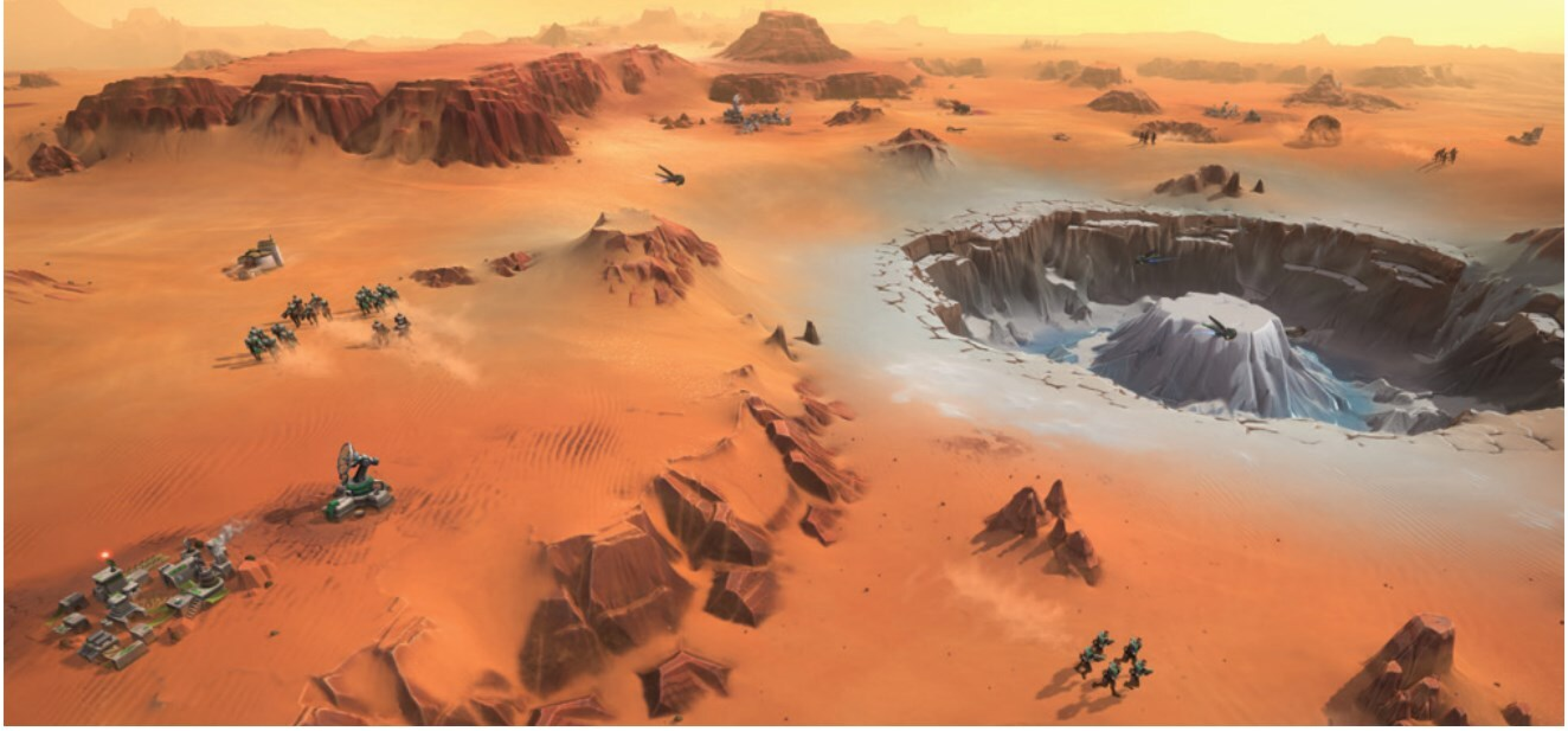
You investigate a bevy of places in Rune Factory 5, such as ancient ruins, expansive forests, and even the inside of a volcano. You also meet eclectic townspeople, from an apprentice carpenter who would rather nap his days away, to a curious young lad obsessed with becoming a detective. The villagers will also post requests, challenging you to grow certain crops, run errands for them, or even capture certain monsters. Helping not only gives you mini-missions to add to your day-to-day activities but earns you some valuable rewards, whether it be extra crop seeds or even new equipment.

Like past games, you split your time between tending to your fields for money and fighting baddies to advance the plot further. My hands-on time revealed the depth the series is known for; you can tap into cooking, fishing, crafting equipment, forging armor upgrades, and mixing potions. I felt a constant sense of progression from watching my skills grow, and there was always something new to pursue, whether it's saving up to buy new furniture for advanced crafting recipes or locating new dungeons. Monsters can also be tamed and used to fight with you in battle or help on your farm.

I most enjoyed getting to know the characters and opening sub-events that gave me a better idea of their personalities. For the first time in the series, you can romance any of the twelve marriage candidates regardless of your character's gender. I only experienced a slice of combat, but there are seven different weapon types, such as swords, staves, and boxing gloves. As you play, you open new melee combos, discover "Rune Abilities," specific to certain weapons, and add new moves, like releasing shockwaves on charge attacks. This flexibility comes in handy, as you often face off against big bosses, like a nine-tailed fox, to close your dungeons.

Rune Factory 5 looks to hold the sense of discovery and depth that has made fans fall in love with the series. Some technical hiccups, mainly with frame rate and slow load times, showed up in my demo. But hopefully, these issues get ironed out in the final release because right now, the title looks to have an engaging gameplay loop. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Xseed Games **DEVELOPER** Hakama **RELEASE** March 22



DUNE: SPICE WARS

Control the spice

Dune has a long history with gaming, but it remains an elusive franchise to get right. Frank Herbert's sprawling sci-fi universe is rewarding, in part, because of its complexity and many interlocking aspects of politics, warfare, characters, and economic systems. That same intricacy can be challenging to transition into a playable experience. Shiro Games is taking a swing at the challenge with its upcoming Spice Wars. The early demo I saw proves a nuanced understanding of the property – if the developer can make the whole experience understandable.

Dune: Spice Wars is a real-time 4X game in which players control a faction in pursuit of control of the spice on the desert world of Arrakis. The familiar Atreides and Harkonnen factions, which feature most prominently in the first book and the recent film, are the first revealed factions, but two remain unannounced. Each faction has unique capabilities and at least some distinct units. For instance, the Atreides can opt to peacefully align with desert villages in a way the Harkonnen cannot. And the Harkonnen have troopers who grow stronger as they decrease in health.

During play, you scout out across a procedurally generated map filled with opportunities for battle and resource acquisition. Use wind traps to gather precious water, or be the first to find and take the icy north pole of the planet for a significant influx of the liquid. Find masses of spice, and set up nearby refineries, from which harvesters can retrieve the all-important substance. All told, you're juggling needs connected to a wide variety of resources and currency, including Solari (money), plascrete for building, manpower, authority, and your Landsraad standing with the other Houses.

Gameplay focuses on balancing your growth and expansion even as you keep all those balls in the air. Do you sell your spice to the economic mercantile exchange of CHOAM, or keep it in your stockpile to help cover your Imperial spice tax? One gets you money, but the other ensures you maintain your political standing. Send agents to bolster your success in a given arena – are they better spent courting the spacing guild or garnering sympathy with local villages?

During the demo, I enjoyed the mix of classic units on a map military and resource play and how it's interspersed with political maneuvering. It's fun to see your faction's military squads range out across the map and engage in skirmishes. Still, it's equally enjoyable to work the Landsraad of Great Houses, pushing for resolutions that will aid your efforts while targeting your enemies.

The developers at Shiro Games clearly have a deep affection for the Dune universe and a thorough understanding of what makes that fiction so enthralling. Even so, that comes along with a complexity of different systems that may be challenging to balance. And there's also the challenge of taking the monotone environments of a desert planet and making them appealing for long play sessions. Those are both surmountable issues, and I'm hopeful about the team's early progress in modernizing the Dune strategy formula. Players should have an opportunity to offer their feedback soon; early access is planned for launch this spring. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Funcom **DEVELOPER** Shiro Games **RELEASE** TBA

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

At Aionios' end

Monolith Soft is returning to the universe of xenoblades and back slashes with Xenoblade Chronicles 3, announced during February's Nintendo Direct. While it looks similar to Xenoblade Chronicles X, one of the last remaining major Nintendo-published games stuck on the Wii U, it quickly became clear that this isn't a port; it's a full-blown sequel to 2017's Xenoblade Chronicles 2.

And what's more, it's doubling as a sequel to the very first Xenoblade Chronicles. Monolith Soft's co-founder Tetsuya Takahashi has since revealed that this threequel "is a new adventure bringing together the worlds of Xenoblade Chronicles and Xenoblade Chronicles 2 to take players into the future." As for how far into the future, that remains unclear, but it does appear that Xenoblade Chronicles 3 takes place after the two entries before it.

For the new adventure, players step into the roles of dual protagonists Noah and Mio amidst conflict and turmoil between the warring nations Keves and Agnus. Six characters hailing from these two nations join Noah and Mio on their new adventure that Monolith says relates to "life" as its central theme.

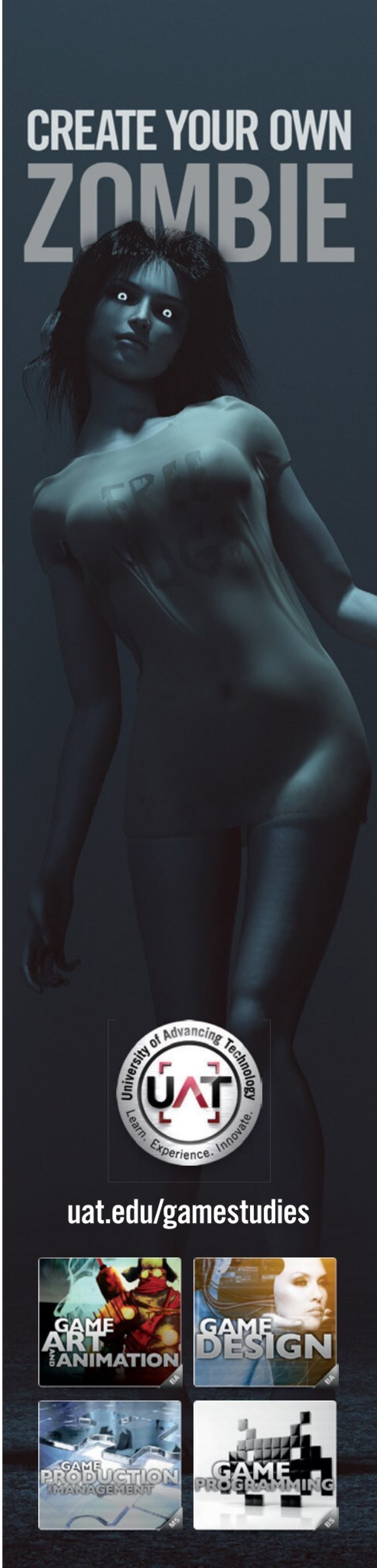
Taking place in Aionios, Keves is a nation where mechanical technology flourishes. Its military forces use mobile weapons, not unlike mechs seen in other entries, that are operated by soldiers riding atop them. If you see someone draped in black, there's a good chance they're from Keves. If they're wearing white, they might hail from Agnus, a nation strong in ether, a magical technology that powers specialized combat units and mobile autonomous weapons.

The key imagery released for Xenoblade Chronicles 3 thus far features a broken great sword of Mechonis and the body of the Urayan Titan with a gaping wound. Takahashi is not ready to reveal what that visual means just yet, but it seems it will play a major role in the narrative.

If you watched the trailer, you likely noticed how great the score sounds, which is no surprise for the Xenoblade series. Takahashi also revealed that the flute-based melody played throughout the announcement trailer will be a motif for Xenoblade Chronicles 3. While September is still a few months away, the threequel's flute melody should tide you over until Nintendo and Monolith Soft reveal more information about Aionios, Noah, and Mio, and how the game connects the previous two entries.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM Switch
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Monolith Soft
RELEASE September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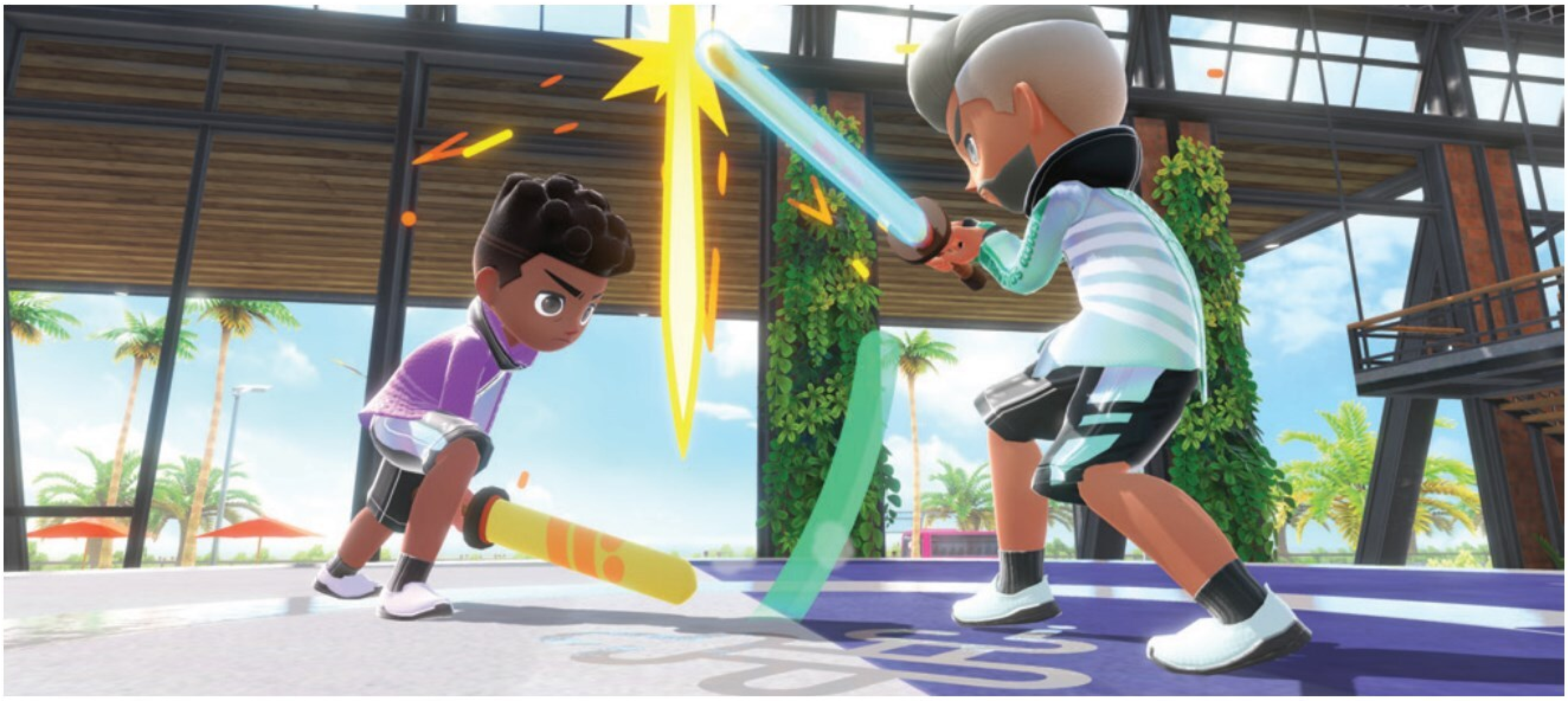
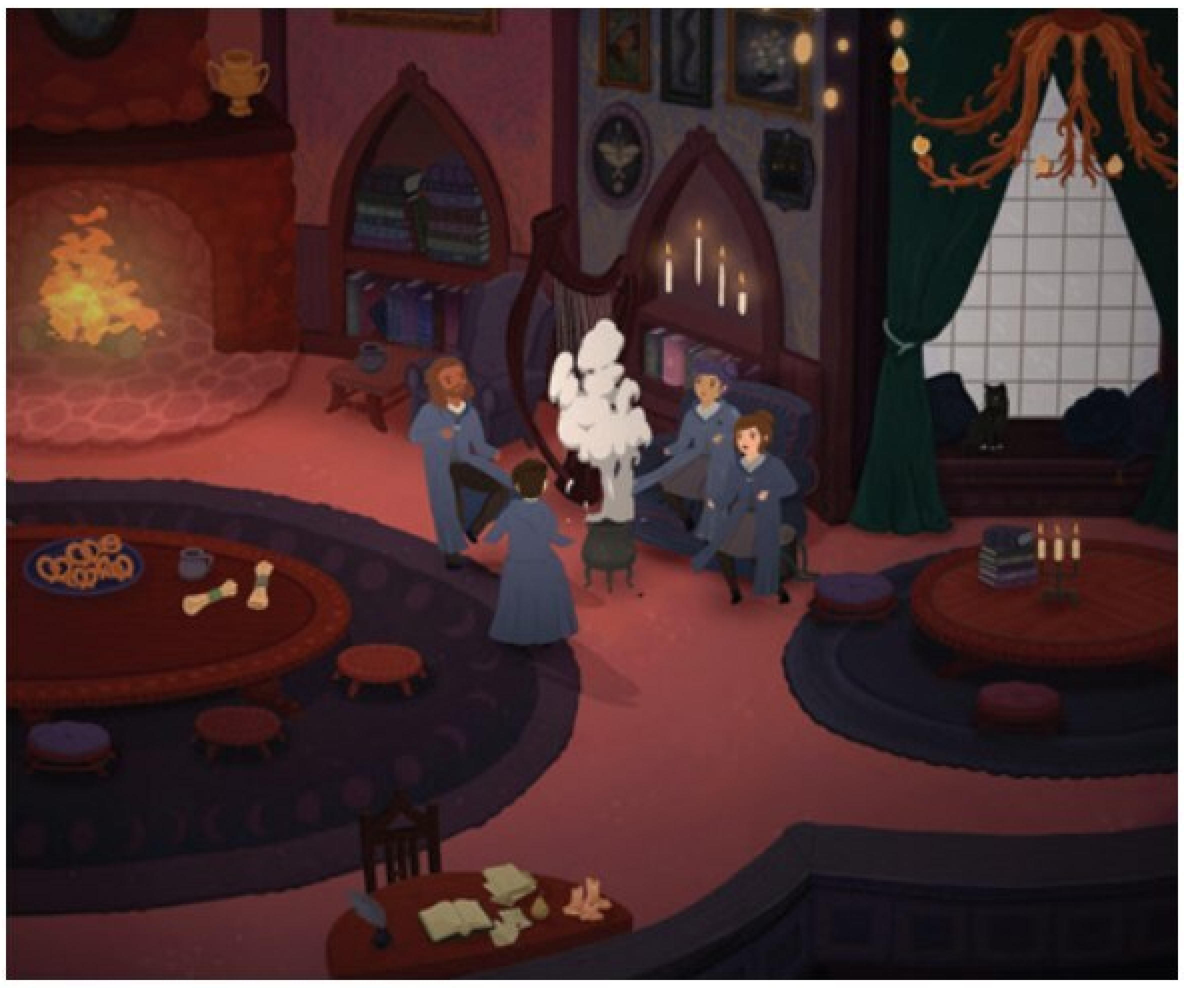


NINTENDO SWITCH SPORTS

This latest iteration in the motion-controlled series lets you use your Joy-Cons to play six different sports. You can compete in-person or online in bowling, tennis, Chambara (swordplay), volleyball, badminton, and soccer. Following the game's April 29 launch, players can look forward to a free update this fall that will add golf to the collection. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

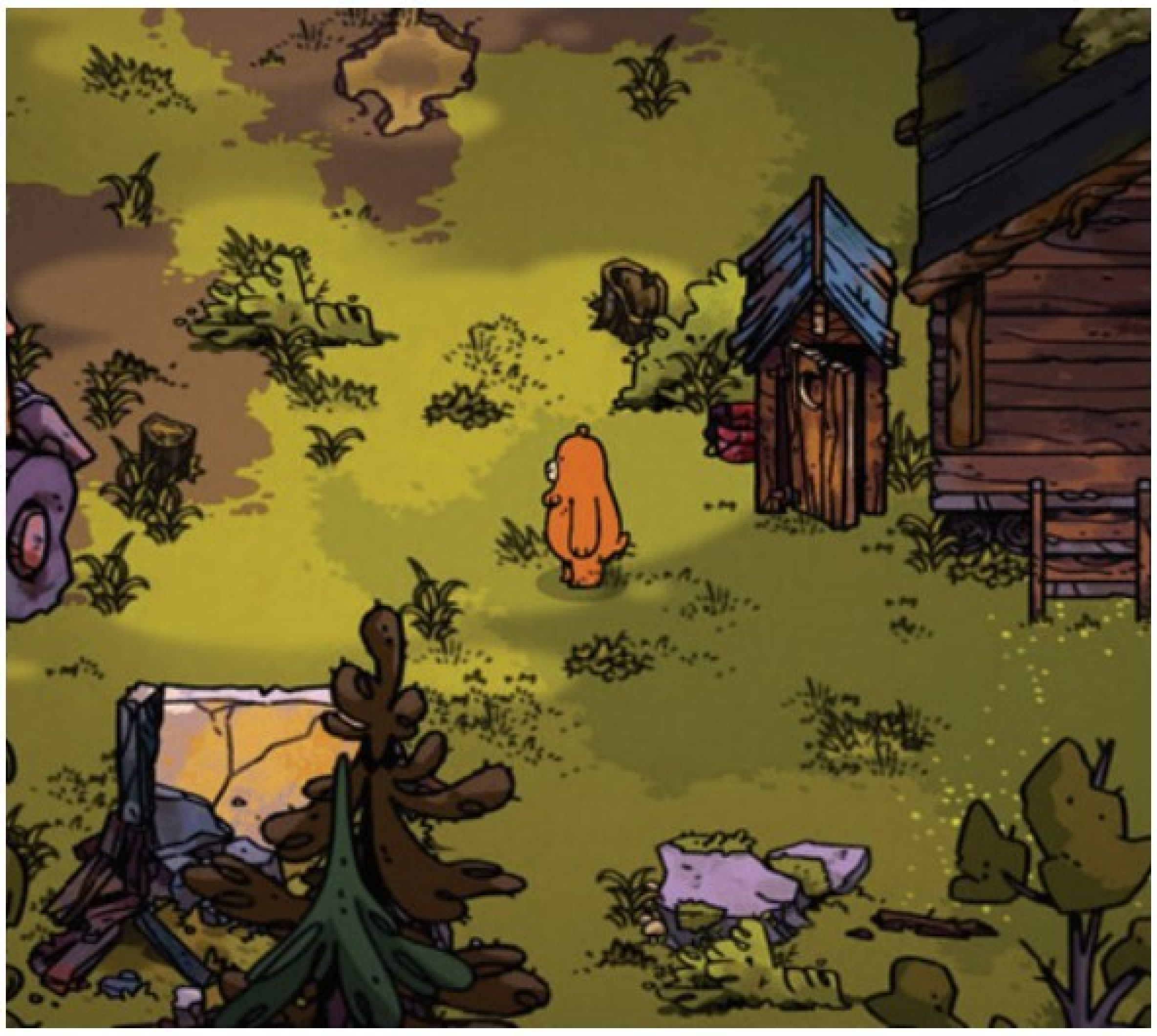
SONGS OF GLIMMERWICK



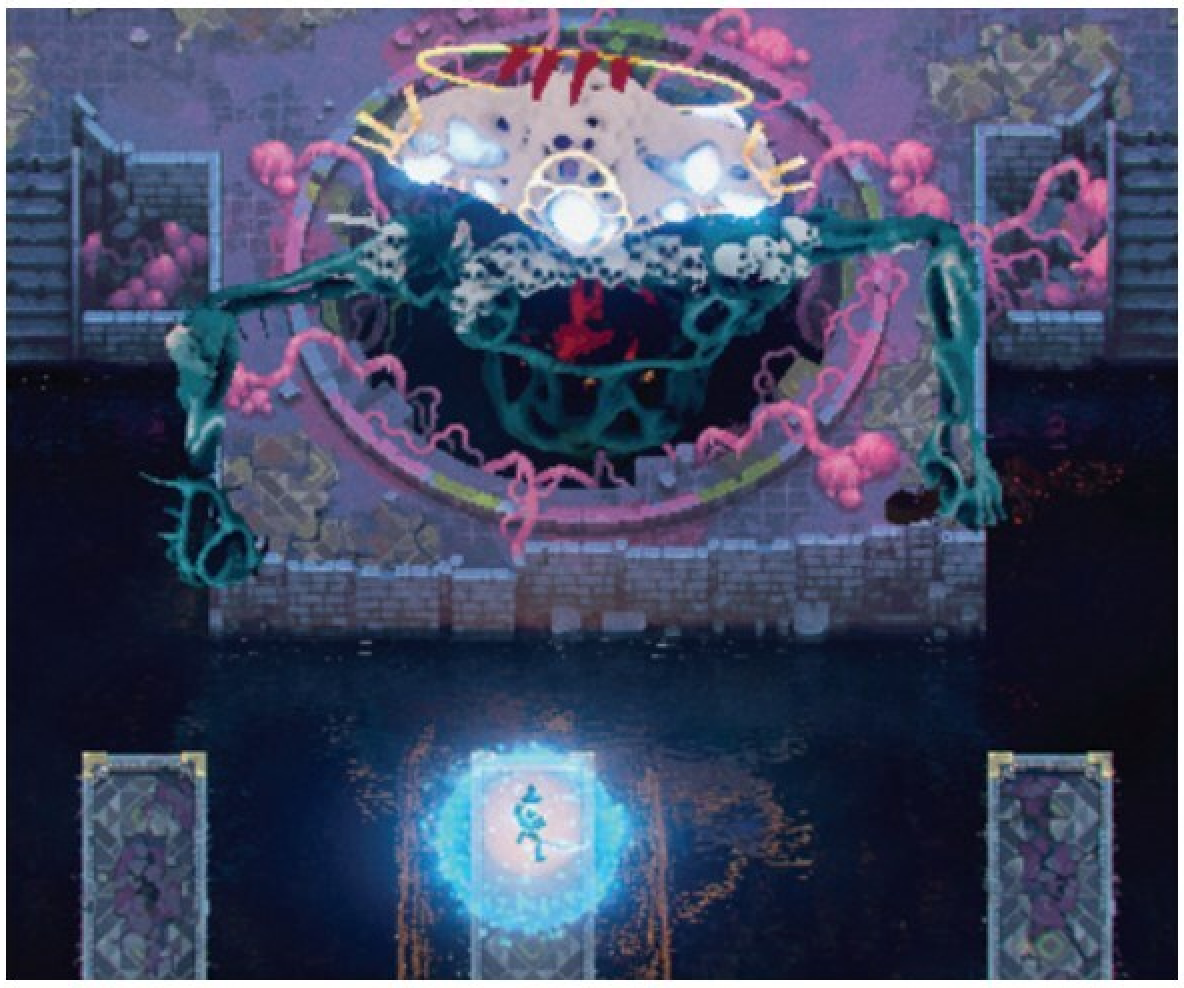
Set to release in 2023 on PC, the next game by Eastshade's developer, Eastshade Studios, has you enrolled in a musical, magical academy. The Hogwarts-like experience promises a story-driven adventure where you'll manipulate mystical forces with your flute, attend lectures, revitalize the school's extraordinary garden, and make friends with both your fellow students and folk in the surrounding town. **BY JILL GRODT**

BEAR AND BREAKFAST

Believe it or not, Bear and Breakfast is a game about a bear trying to run a bed and breakfast. You're shocked, I'm sure. Expected to be released sometime this year, B&B is a management sim where players can customize each room of their inn, complete quests, and, supposedly, "uncover a world rich in lore, side quests, characters, and secrets." **BY BLAKE HESTER**



LOOT RIVER



Straka Studio's Loot River quickly garnered the attention of roguelike fans, puzzle fans, and Bloodborne fans – not a bad party. That's because this visually stunning indie roguelike, coming to Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC, tasks players with shifting platforms in a Tetris-like manner to escape foes or get the upper hand on enemies while advancing along a dark and decrepit river. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

ROOTS OF PACHA

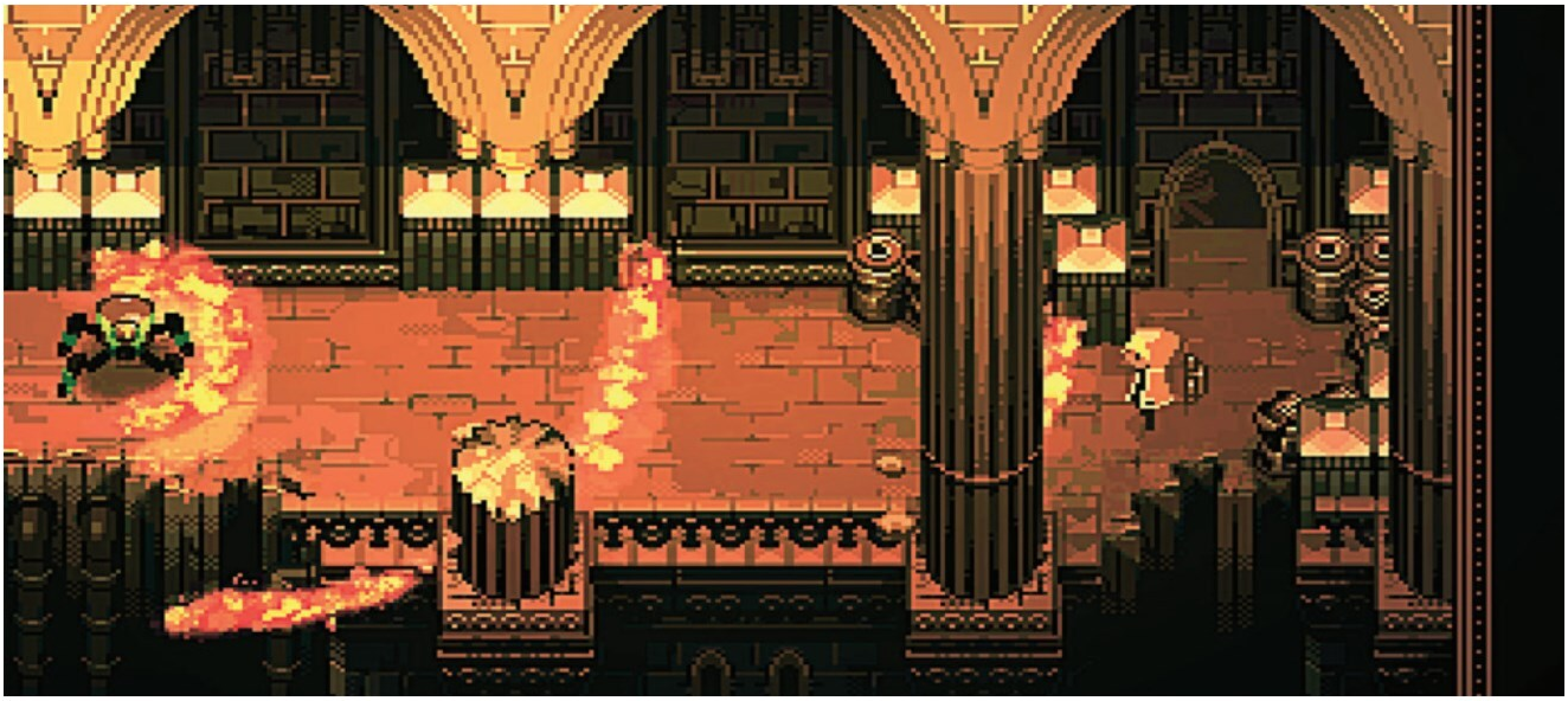
Looking for a cutesy stone age adventure with accessible farming simulator mechanics and a pixel-art Stardew Valley aesthetic? Then Roots of Pacha might be the perfect fit for you. Customize your character, grow vegetables, domesticate animals, invent revolutionary tools, and befriend or court villagers as the community around you flourishes. Better yet, do it all with a friend when Roots of Pacha drops on PC sometime this year. **BY JASON GUISAO**

VESSELS OF DECAY

Civilization collapsed centuries ago. In its place, creatures older than humankind have taken over. You are a young woman named Mud who ventures deep into decaying lands to defeat a series of monsters inspired by Scandinavian folklore. Vessels of Decay is an incredible top-down action adventure with a stylish pixel art design that truly sets it apart. **BY BEN REEVES**

THE SETTLERS

This real-time strategy series about cultivating, raising armies, and creating a thriving city beginning from mere scraps has been around for over thirty years. After humble starts involving collecting lumber, founding quarries, exploring the wilderness, it's eventually time to push out against the boundaries of your safe borders. Three unique factions are available for a sprawling campaign and multiplayer gameplay. We'll see how the franchise comeback lands in March. **BY DANIEL TACK**

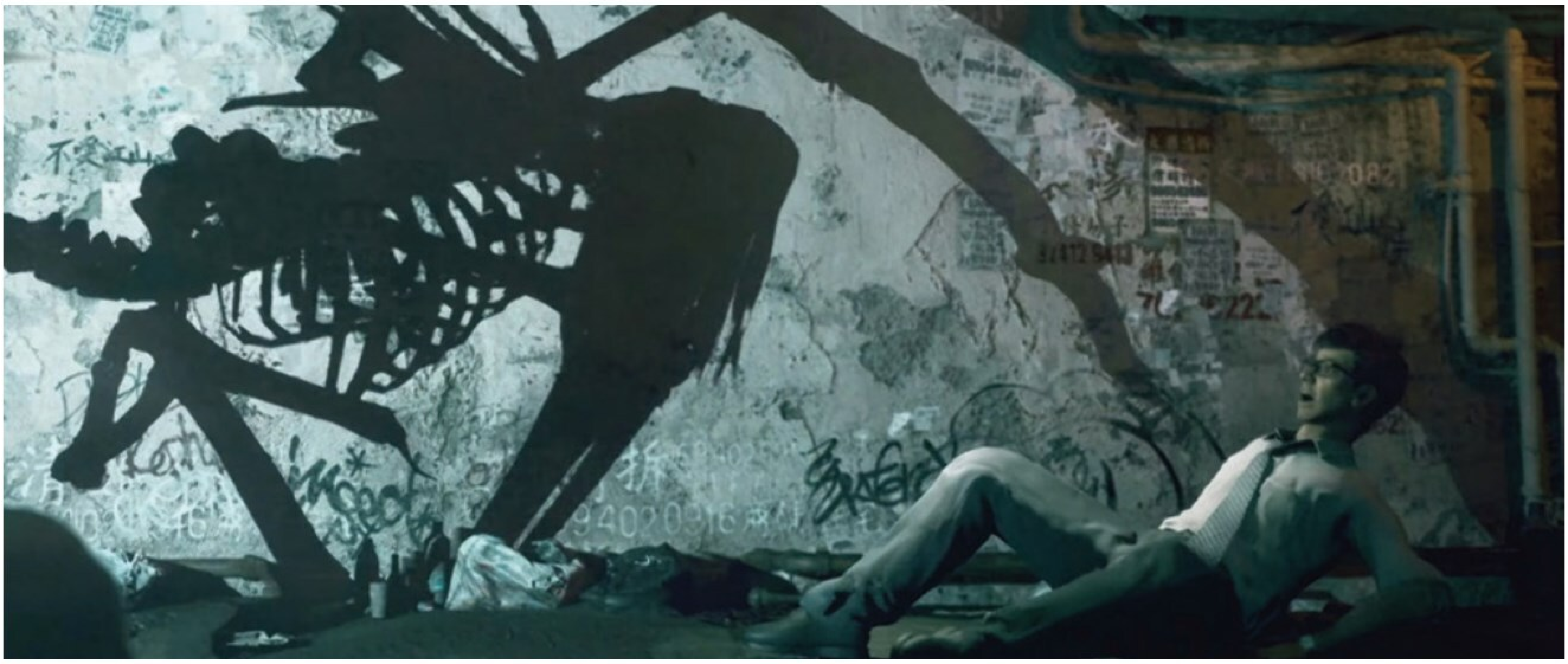


RADIO THE UNIVERSE

Kickstarted in 2013, developer 6E6E6E's incredibly stylish, Zelda-meets-Secret of Mana dungeon crawler might be slowly inching toward release. Radio the Universe tells a dark sci-fi tale about one hero's descent into a fractured, bottomless city shrouded in fog, and we're already sold on its moody pixel art aesthetic and haunting, synth-heavy soundtrack. **BY BEN REEVES**

SLITTERHEAD

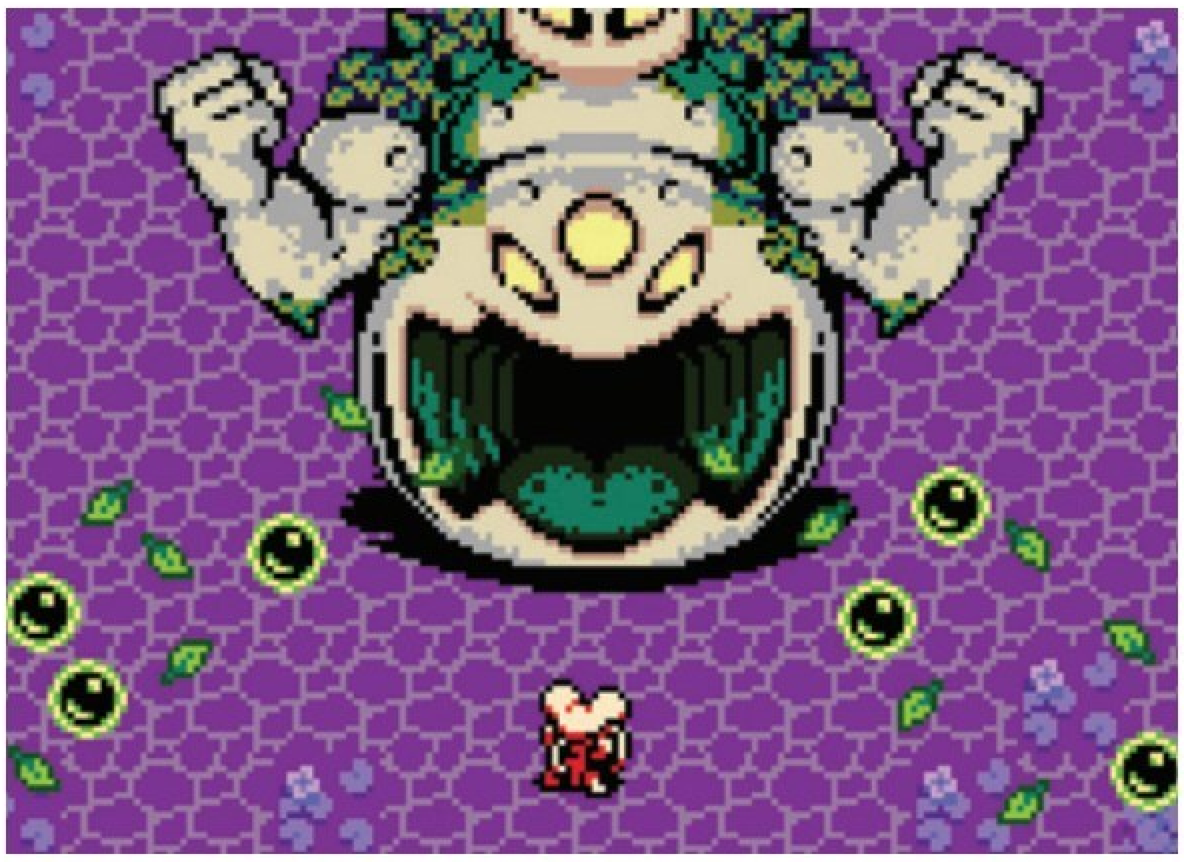
It's been a long time since Silent Hill director Keiichiro Toyama made a horror game. And that's why we can't wait to play Slitterhead, Toyama's next baffling nightmare. We don't know much about the game yet, aside from it coming out sometime in the next year or so and that it'll be available on PC, at least. We also know it's about people's heads splitting open into gaping maws, transforming them into horrible, hideous beasts. For now, that's more than enough to get us on board. **BY BLAKE HESTER**



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

The Mario Kart 8 Deluxe – Booster Course Pass paid DLC promises 48 additional race tracks by 2023. Six waves containing eight courses each will include an assortment of classic as well as more recent circuits for Nintendo's kart-racing fans. Even N64 arenas like Choco Mountain and the Coconut Mall Wii locale will appear in the game. Wave 1 starts on March 18. **BY JASON GUISAO**

MINA THE HOLLOWER



Yacht Club Games is back with a new IP that, like Shovel Knight before it, is built upon some potent retro influences. Mina the Hollower is a top-down action-adventure starring a brilliant inventor and whip-cracking, hatchet lobbing mouse named Mina investigating the sudden loss of power on Tenebrous Isle. To solve the island's mystery, she'll jump and burrow her way through plenty of spooky graveyards and gothic castles perfectly presented as if they were ripped from a Game Boy Color cartridge. **BY JOHN CARSON**

WARHAMMER 40,000: CHAOS GATE - DAEMONHUNTERS

There is no end to Warhammer games these days, but Chaos Gate - Daemonhunters' take on XCOM-style strategy piqued our interest. This reboot of a 1998 PC release puts you in charge of a squad of superhuman Grey Knights as they push back against the followers of an all-consuming plague lord. Along the way, you'll upgrade your base of operations, unlock devastating new psychic abilities, and go toe-to-toe with screen-filling bosses that shake up the standard turn-based action. **BY BEN REEVES** ■

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GI MUST PLAY

ELDEN RING

An absolutely astonishing adventure

Once in a great while, a game comes along that seamlessly combines impeccable gameplay, a wondrous world, incredible tone-setting music, and unparalleled art direction. From Software's Elden Ring is one of those games, an action RPG that channels the best aspects of the studio's last decade of work into one enormous package. This absurdly ambitious open world captivated my curiosity, enticed me with puzzles, secrets, and mysteries, and served up incredibly satisfying moments as I experienced one of the most extraordinary adventures of all time. From my initial foray into the world to the final moments, every step of the journey was a note in a personalized epic that kept me coming back for more, continually serving up sensational sights that only got more enthralling and fantastic as the voyage went on.

The Lands Between is a world full of discovery, and while a clear path forward exists for those seeking guidance, roaming the lands unfettered without a particular goal in mind often yields surprises. I often had a spot to explore marked on my map and got off-track along the way, sometimes leading to entirely new areas and feature-dense zones. Elden Ring is not a theme park-style open world where each ride is bolstered by breadcrumbs so they won't be missed – there are significant areas, bosses, dungeons, and other huge revelations that can be passed by, making these finds even more delightful. Even after over 55 hours, I know that I've missed plenty. Instead of pining over what I haven't found, I'm inspired to keep exploring. The grandiose world is chock full of characters, quests, and various dungeon crawls ranging from tiny catacombs to massive multilayered tombs. While the journey starts with little caves, mines, and other dungeon delves, these experiences become more complex. Two-room affairs eventually become intricate teleport puzzles or scenarios where you discover unusual ways to interact with the environment, like learning to use traps for traversal or sniffing out secret walls.

The open world is majestic, dripping with flavor and atmosphere, and full of fabulous finds. However, the legacy dungeons are the stuff of legend. These curated sprawls are a dream to dissect, and Elden Ring often offers different ways to maneuver through these areas. For instance, in one giant dungeon, I discovered a completely different way to "solve" the route to the final boss – and then went back and found a divergent path through another environment, leading to a wealth of battles, bosses, and loot. Sometimes, access to certain areas is in the last place you look, but the route to unearth it is laden with even more attractive paths to pursue.

The big bosses, generally found at the end of legacy dungeons, feel like wonderful wars against demigods. These brilliant set piece battles are thrilling exclamation points to an outrageous odyssey, absolute spectacles, and masterful combinations of tension and triumph. Elden Ring even has the distinction of having the best and most challenging boss battle in any From Software game to date. Hidden away and optional, this encounter had me waking up in the middle of the night to come back and crash against its beautiful and terrifying destruction over and over again. After finally besting this opponent, I let loose a triumphant victory roar there while sitting in the dark and wearing my pajamas, wanting nothing more than to experience the encounter again. This example speaks to how compelling and immersive Elden Ring is; I regularly put it down with the intent of doing something else and found myself back within minutes. There is always one more gnawing mystery to unravel, one more boss to beat, and one more hidden route to find.

Elden Ring challenged me, captivated me, and enchanted me, an unyielding deluge of discovery and artistic vision unbound. It represents a truly amazing combination of various game elements that all come together to create something fascinating, special, and unforgettable. Elden Ring isn't just one of the best games this year; it's one of the best games ever made. **BY DANIEL TACK**

10

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** From Software **RELEASE** February 25 **RATING** M

GI MUST PLAY

HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

Leaping to greater heights

Horizon Zero Dawn was just the introduction to Guerrilla Games' fascinating world and the unlikely hero who would do everything in her power to save it. The sequel, Horizon Forbidden West, takes everything to an exciting new level with its novel mechanics and riveting lore. Guerrilla Games improves on the last title's shortcomings and isn't afraid to borrow popular features from other big-name series, like Uncharted, Mass Effect, and Assassin's Creed. The result is a game that's not only fun to play, but full of surprises and wonder.

Forbidden West picks up six months after the events of Zero Dawn. Aloy's discoveries have only brought more questions and dangers her way, forcing her to head west for answers. With a few returning characters and plot tie-ins from the first game, Forbidden West isn't ideal for newcomers who want to embrace the narrative. Guerrilla's writers expertly expand upon Horizon's rich lore and dive into the series' sci-fi elements, which are the sequel's most gripping aspects. The overall narrative kept me engaged, but certain parts felt rushed, and I was disappointed that villainous characters like Regalla are not given more time to shine.

In the last entry, Aloy's journey was often solitary, but Forbidden West makes other characters central to her success, which is a nice change of pace. Returning faces like Varl and Erend get to show more of their personalities, and newcomers like tragic warrior Kotallo have interesting backstories. To make these burgeoning relationships more authentic, Aloy establishes a home base, where she can talk to her companions about new developments in the main quest, learn their thoughts about one another, and get to know them more on a personal level. I loved watching the base populate with new members and seeing new areas open within it.

The world is the star of the show. Forbidden West is a technical marvel, with breathtaking vistas, vibrant underwater corridors, and lush jungles. Traversal has been improved, with smoother climbing mechanics and a new tool called the Shield Wing, which acts almost like a futuristic umbrella to let you descend from great heights. The world's constant sense of discovery really had me glued to my controller. Forbidden West is a much bigger game than its predecessor, featuring an impressive number of quests and items to uncover. The story-focused side quests add so much to the lore that I never wanted to miss one, as they provided great insight into the tribes.

Battles are still adrenaline-pumping affairs, and the satisfaction of besting monstrous machines never dissipates. You can expect more destructibility and bigger setpieces for fights, and I loved how the variety in the locales, from fighting in

close quarters to rocky areas, kept things fresh with new strategies to consider. Forbidden West allows you to embrace your own playstyle, offering many ways to get the upper hand on machines. I enjoyed the creativity at my disposal, like shooting weapons off machines to use in battle or causing chain reactions with specific elements for big explosions. But at the same time, I never felt a growing sense of power that keeps combat interesting over time, and a lot of this comes down to my disappointment in the skill trees.

The abilities you learn via the skill trees feel more like tiny perks than exciting upgrades. For instance, you can unlock the ability to set up traps faster alongside weapon techniques that do anything from guaranteeing a knockdown shot to increased shredder damage. The best addition to the skill trees is Valor Surges, which are special attacks you tactically unleash. I wish there were more of these abilities to experiment with, because once I unlocked the radial blast, which triggers a powerful AoE shockwave, I never found another that felt as valuable. Unfortunately, the skill trees were so inconsequential to my success that I let my skill points pile upward of 10 without even touching them.

Thankfully, the game is full of worthwhile improvements that make for a better experience. My favorite enhancements were being able to use Aloy's focus to see climbing points and her ability to tag specific machine parts in a different color for easier targeting. The latter comes in handy for key upgrade resources, as certain machine components are crucial to upgrade your armor and weapons. Upgrades are a greater time investment as a result, and I grew tired of fighting the same machines repeatedly. As far as performance, I ran into a few minor glitches alongside some poor A.I. pathing and bad checkpoints, but none of these were significant issues that caused me much frustration.

Horizon Forbidden West reaches a new high bar for Guerrilla Games. It does more than surpass its predecessor; it takes Horizon's fiction to captivating places and builds a rich world that rewards you for the effort you put into it. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

9.25

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Guerrilla Games **RELEASE** February 18 **RATING** T

DYING LIGHT 2: STAY HUMAN

An apocalyptic renaissance

Decades into the apocalypse, the undead forces roaming the world evolve and grow stronger with each passing night. And humanity is fighting back. Within strongholds scattered across The City, technological breakthroughs are born, and the tide of war is changing in favor of the living. An electronic wristband can keep people from turning after a zombie bite, and even the most aggressive monster variants don't stand a chance against the latest weapon innovations. But all is not well beyond these walls. Darkness lies within, and humanity's most significant threat for survival is itself. Greed, lust, betrayal, and arcane politics could ultimately lead to its downfall.

Dying Light 2: Stay Human blends the terrors of the dead with the strife of life to create one of the most entertaining RPGs I've ever played. It's a triumph of storytelling, player choice, open-world design, cooperative play, character customization, and perhaps most importantly, dropkicking zombies off skyscrapers. It's everything a sequel should be, growing the core formula in significant ways to make the high-flying, zombie-slaying experience sizzle again.

Within the 50-plus hours I vested in this fantastic game, I often thought about playing The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim for the first time; feeling overwhelmed by its wealth of content and not knowing if I screwed something up by a hasty decision I made. Dying Light 2 is drawn from that same breath, blending a rich world of discovery with choices galore. It's an experience you can lose yourself in, and almost all of the content you unearth is significant to evolving both the story and your character.

Our guide into this wasteland is Aiden Caldwell, a survivor haunted by ghosts of his past, who re-enters society at a tipping point. Aiden is a likable lead who is defined mainly by his choices. He lords over the city like an apocalyptic judge, often determining who lives, who dies, and which factions gain wealth and power. Most of his choices carry weight and bring closure or new beginnings for many of the characters he meets along the way. I often had to stop to think about the benefits and ramifications of a decision. Techland sometimes forces your hand in these moments by putting a timer on the more pressing matters to heighten their impact. And it works.

When Aiden heads out on a mission, the player is in for a real treat. Not only are the objectives well written and dynamic in how they unfold, they almost always push for Aiden to bound across rooftops. Dying Light 2's parkour system is a work of art set within a beautiful, sprawling city that doubles as an architectural playground. Clear pathways are littered across the environments, allowing Aiden to keep momentum and reach almost any location by just running, jumping, and using some of the game's awesome gadgets. I won't go into what they are as discovering them is part of the fun, but they all enhance the locomotion and are a blast to use. All told, this is one of the most satisfying and nicely designed traversal systems in FPS gaming.

Aiden's missions offer plenty of variety and chain together locations, sewing puzzles and combat into the mix. I'm impressed by how varied, well-written, and dynamically composed the missions are. The critical path delivers the big set-piece moments, but the side material is just as vital to the overall narrative and can be lengthy. Nothing in this game feels tacked on – it's all worth investigating. And it's all made better through cooperative play, as you and three of your friends can team up, or divide and conquer to claim territories, clear out dangerous dark hallows, and find valuable loot (like inhibitor boxes that raise your stamina and health).

Combat is the one area that takes a bit of a backseat. It's a huge part of the experience, and it's a heck of a lot of fun to eviscerate Biters, but it isn't as advanced as the other parts of the game, and it doesn't evolve much, either. Regardless, crafting blades that cough fire and electrocute zombies is satisfying, and that dropkick I mentioned is worth using as much as you can. Boss battles and swarm battles are made better through cooperative play as the difficulty (and hit points) scale up and create more dynamic encounters. One such fight against a titan pushed my group of four players to unload everything they had – Molotov cocktails, arrows, and carefully timed sword combos – to finally drop. The rewards that came after were well worth the effort. Mastering parry timing against human foes – who are just as abundant as zombies – can be tricky, but isn't something you have to rely on as more combat moves unlock.

Dying Light 2 is an engaging journey of discovery and gaining power. Almost everything you do embraces those dynamics. In evolving beyond the first's games offering, putting a stronger emphasis on the characters helps shape the world in meaningful ways. Some of Aiden's choices are difficult to make, especially those surrounding a character named Lawan – who is given a hell of a pulse by Rosario Dawson. I can't say enough great things where his and her stories go. I adored almost every second of this game and see myself revisiting it often, as Techland has announced at least five years of DLC is on the way. That's a wonderful promise to hear when starting a new game that has turned out this well.

BY ANDREW REINER

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Techland
DEVELOPER Techland **RELEASE** February 4 **RATING** M

GI MUST PLAY

POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

Learning some new moves

Catching as many Pokémon as you can, learning more about them, and training them to be stronger in battle are the very foundations of Game Freak's iconic RPG series. Few titles exemplify those core concepts as powerfully as this latest outing. Pokémon Legends: Arceus tasks you with exploring a bygone era of the Sinnoh region, then known as Hisui, and gives you more ways than ever to complete your Pokédex.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus' early hours are full of exposition and long, dialogue-filled scenes, but once I was finally set free in the Hisui region, the gameplay loop sunk its hooks into me. En route to filling your Pokédex, you uncover various mysteries surrounding anomalies throughout the region. Some narrative beats and character arcs did not land for me, but the story is a step up for the series.

Running around vast, open areas in search of new creatures to add to your Pokédex is enthralling. I love how simply catching a Pokémon doesn't immediately complete your entry for that monster. Instead, you need to perform mini-tasks to earn points towards completion; the objectives can be too cookie-cutter, but I like how the system made me feel like I was actually studying the Pokémon I encountered rather than mindlessly collecting them.

You can stealthily catch wild Pokémon instead of battling them, which I applaud for how it improves the flow of moving through an area. The wild Pokémon might run if you're spotted, but it may also attack you. You can try to escape, even utilizing dodge-rolls to evade attacks, but your best bet is to toss one of your own Pokémon out to fight. I appreciate how encounters seamlessly transition you from the real-time exploration to an improved iteration on the series' turn-based battle system. Battle menus receive a streamlined interface, and I like how you can choose strong or agile versions of attacks, each with pros and cons. I loved watching the enemy's life bar drain after landing a strong attack, knowing that my gamble paid off.

Hisui is full of diverse biomes, all with linear routes that lead to destinations and points of interest. However, wandering off the beaten path to scavenge resources to use in the game's rudimentary crafting system, discover tucked-away areas, and find new creatures to catch were my favorite moments with the game. Hisui is full of rewarding activities that include stronger Alpha Pokémon to fight and catch, side-missions that involve collecting resources and specific creatures, and special limited-time events to help you further round out your Pokédex.

As you progress, you face off against a handful of frenzied noble Pokémon. Rather than engaging in standard battles, you control your trainer for most of the sequence. You have to throw special balms at them to drain their health bar as you dodge attacks. These fights were fun twists on the boss battles in the Pokémon universe, but imprecise controls sometimes caused me to take unnecessary damage.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus is a beautiful adventure thanks mainly to its colorful art style. However, while character and Pokémon animations are a step up from previous mainline entries, they still lag woefully behind other games in the genre. Additionally, the prominence of dialogue-heavy scenes makes the lack of voice-acting feel like an antiquated relic of the late '90s. Top it all off with lackluster technical performance, full of object pop-in, frame rate drops, and low-resolution textures, and this is hardly a technological marvel.

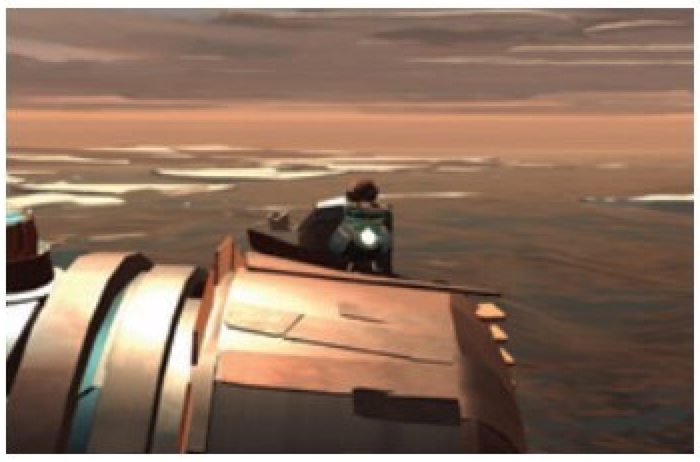
Despite these shortcomings, Pokémon Legends: Arceus is a worthwhile spin-off adventure. With an enticing gameplay loop, fun side activities, and a story I'm glad I saw through to the end, Pokémon Legends: Arceus sets a solid foundation for what I hope is the next evolution for the series. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.75

PLATFORM Switch
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Game Freak
RELEASE January 28 **RATING** E

FAR: CHANGING TIDES

Far: Changing Tides isn't an action-packed roller coaster ride – it's a contemplative journey that isn't afraid to slow down and ask you to reflect on your expedition. Whether I was watching the clouds glide over a flooded city with the wind at my back or white-knuckling through a storm as ten-foot waves bombarded my ship, I was always completely enrapt by the moment. **BY BEN REEVES**



8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Frontier Foundry **DEVELOPER** Okomotive **RELEASE** March 1 **RATING** E

LOST ARK

Amazon Game's second run at the MMO market is very impressive. The years of content already created for Lost Ark provide an enticing package filled to the brim with fun activities and exciting locals to explore. Those looking to scratch an Action/RPG itch or sink time into an MMO won't go wrong giving this adventure a fair shot. **BY JOHN CARSON**

8.25

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** Online Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Amazon Games **DEVELOPER** Tripod Games **RELEASE** February 11 **RATING** M

OLLIOLLI WORLD

OlliOlli World is simultaneously an easy-to-approach 2D skateboarding game with an impossibly high skill ceiling. Early on, the game does a great job quickly teaching you the basics of its trick systems and then getting out of your way, dropping you in levels, giving you objectives, and letting you skate. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Private Division **DEVELOPER** Roll7 **RELEASE** February 8 **RATING** E10+

INFERNAX

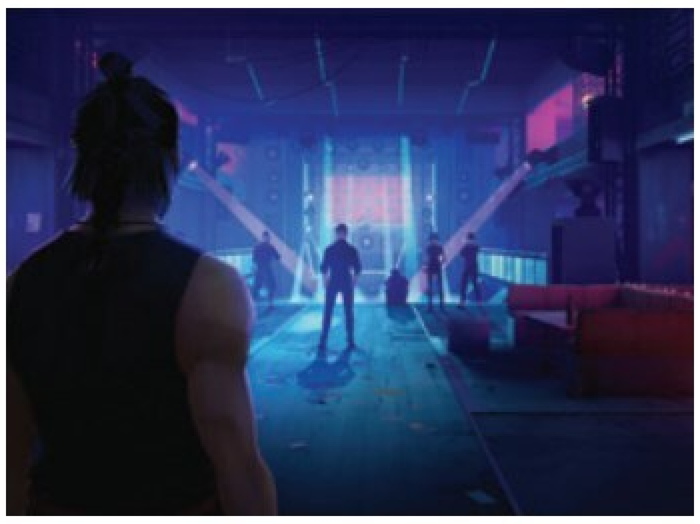
From the moment you step onto these demon-infested lands to the moment you deal the killing blow to the final boss, you'll experience plenty of surprises. Infernax's retro soundtrack that rips from start to finish, beautiful art, challenging gameplay, and a fun Castlevania-inspired design, make it worth the price of admission. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** The Arcade Crew **DEVELOPER** Berzerk Studio **RELEASE** February 14 **RATING** 4+

SIFU

Its core combat feels excellent, and the moment-to-moment action looks better than most Hollywood blockbusters. Sadly, as you progress, the action begins to show its teeth and eventually becomes a tiresome grind. Sifu deserves props for its incredible sense of style and tone, but it is also a great example of why growing old isn't always fun. **BY BEN REEVES**



7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sloclap **DEVELOPER** Sloclap **RELEASE** February 8 **RATING** M

MARTHA IS DEAD

LKA made the best recreation of an Italian setting I've ever seen in a game and I wanted nothing more than to enjoy it. However, LKA's love of Italy is the only warmth I felt in Martha is Dead. The rest left me feeling as cold as Giulia's dead sister.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC ■

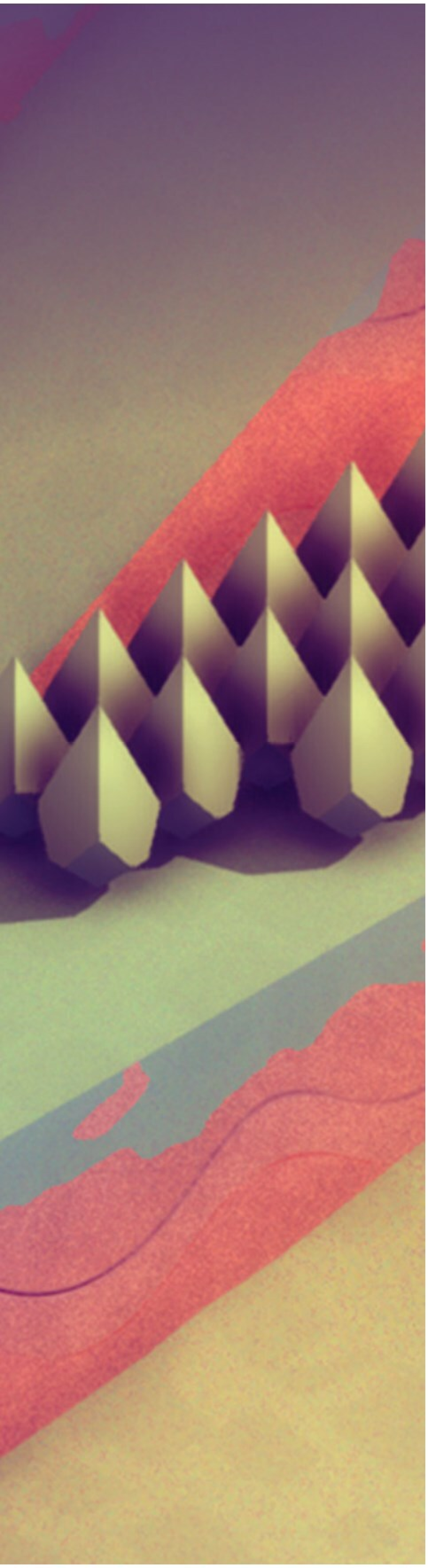
6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Wired Productions **DEVELOPER** LKA **RELEASE** February 24 **RATING** M

TRACING THREADS

The making of Tunic

BY JILL GRODT



TUNIC STARTED WITH a difficult choice for lead developer Andrew Shouldice: stay at his stable job or take the plunge and quit to work full-time on his budding game idea. In 2015, Shouldice closed his eyes and jumped. However, when asked why he made that decision, he initially hesitates.

"Why indeed?" Shouldice answers after a beat with a chuckle and a dramatic tone that suggests Tunic's development cycle has been a long one. There is no single incident he can point to that spurred him into making his choice. Instead, several factors, including how much he enjoyed making past one-off projects and his dwindling excitement for his job, influenced his decision to strike out on his own. His departure wasn't without uncertainty.

"I remember thinking to myself, this might be a bad decision," Shouldice says. "But I would rather make the bad decision now than always wonder what could have been, you know? Which is very cheesy, I understand. But that was sort of the thing that ended up pushing me over the edge. I really want to do this. Maybe it's a bad idea, but I have to know."

Seven years after its inception and four since its grand debut on the E3 stage, Tunic is finally launching. The vibrant isometric action game puts you in the boots of a sword-wielding fox fighting through a world of winding paths, mysterious structures, merciless enemies, and hidden secrets. Its art style, combat, and setting earned Tunic an ever-growing crowd of fans over the years. But while it's currently one of the most anticipated indie releases of the year, Tunic started as a small solo project. With the launch date in sight, the game's team retreads Tunic's journey from obscure undertaking to eagerly awaited title, sharing the challenges, hopes, and remarkable moments that dotted the way.

The Adventure Begins

Free of his employment safety net, Shouldice sat down – coffee in hand – to work on a project that wasn't even a fully formed concept. His only direction at this early point was to make a game "with lots of secrets" and a protagonist "going on an adventure."

That moment was when the game's now-familiar vulpine hero started to take shape. Despite the sword-wielding fox being one of Tunic's most endearing elements, it exemplifies the project's early uncertainty. The creator admits the idea for the creature stemmed, in part, from his limitations in modeling humans. And this wasn't an outlier. Shouldice recalls he struggled a lot with inexperience in the early development process.

"This is the first large-scale, commercial 3D game that I've made," says Shouldice. "And for a long time, I was the only person putting code into it. And I was a programmer by trade, but there are a lot of things to learn about video games. And the programming part wasn't necessarily the trickiest sphere."

Realizing he would need some support, Shouldice began to look for additional creators to help him craft his game.

Shouldice initially sent an email to Tunic's composer, Terence Lee, in 2015. Though excited by the idea of the project, Lee was unsure if he'd be available to work on the adventurous title's music due to other obligations. Later that year at the Game Developers Conference, Tunic's lead developer managed to connect with Lee and Power Up Audio's Kevin Regamey, who would go on to lead the design of Tunic's sounds.

Regamey recognized Tunic's potential after playing a very early version of the game. "I played this build for, like, 10 hours," says Regamey. "It was crazy. [Power Up Audio] all played it as a team, and we're like, 'Who the hell is this guy?'" The moment was even more remarkable for Regamey when he remembers Shouldice saying, "'This probably won't make it in the final game.' And it's true [that] nothing in that build's in the final game."

Luckily, not everything from the game's humble beginnings was scrapped, including the concept for its surprisingly tranquil music. "I always liked that contrast in the game of it being really visually and aesthetically gentle and pleasing but also being difficult gameplay-wise," says Lee. "So, when I made music for it, I intentionally tried to make it a bit more chill and relaxing. And I think a lot of people connected with that." Both composer and audio designer emphasize how vital the soundscape is for Tunic, with Regamey saying, "The audio is almost like a character in that world... there are a lot of moments throughout the game where it is necessary and important for the audio to take the spotlight. The music and the sound are kind of one-to-one with all these other things, like the game design and the level design and the art."

Stitching Tunic Together

With new teammates on board helping to create a concrete and executable game, the early notions of secrets and adventure started getting fleshed out. One concept that enthused Shouldice was "visually pleasing and beautiful" isn't inherently "on the opposite end of the spectrum of difficulty."

"I think there are places for games, like some early Zelda games," says Shouldice, referencing a prominent inspiration for Tunic, "[that] are beautiful and colorful, but still have that amount of difficulty and challenge that encourages you to be brave and to go to places that maybe you're not ready for."

Here, Shouldice's idea of a game with adventure becomes apparent. He seeks not only to create an experience where the character goes out into the world to fight foes and open treasure chests, but one that encourages the players themselves to be adventurous.

"One of the most exciting moments for me when playing a game," says Shouldice, "is seeing something scary and having that thrill of 'I need to run away, or I need to deal with this.'" This idea is not just limited to combat. Tunic's developer suggests that stumbling on seemingly impossible challenges or treading on ground that feels off-limits while exploring is a vital part of the games he admires. In Tunic, Shouldice says he wants players to experience the rush of thinking, "Maybe you're in a place where you're not supposed to be right now, you know? Maybe you're really exploring in uncharted waters now."

Nostalgia has also been instrumental in shaping Tunic. It's clear the game takes many visual and design cues from NES, SNES, and Game Boy-era Zelda entries, but there's more to it than that. The team talks about trying to recreate the feeling of finding unexpected lore in a game's instruction booklet or putting your head together with friends to figure out the answer to a challenging puzzle – something that has become less common when players can simply look up a guide online. One of the easiest places to see Tunic's retro design aspirations is in the in-game illustrated guides scattered throughout the world.

"The pages that you pick up are more than just a collectible. It's not just you know, 'I got all the manual pages. Hurray for me,'" explains Shouldice. "But maybe you've had this experience of flipping through a manual for some game and having that be an extension of the game experience itself. So, it's not just, 'Yeah, I know how to wall kick.' The game tells you all about that. Sometimes there are secrets; there are things that you can only find out from reading the manual in those old games, and Tunic is definitely that way. There are plenty of things that you will have to pore through these pages to figure out."

Last Pieces of the Puzzle

With the core game coming together, producer Felix Kramer joined the crew and, in 2017, publisher Finji – now known for Chicory: A Colorful Tale and Night in the Woods – started working on ways to spotlight the project. A year later, Tunic took center stage at Xbox's E3 showcase.

"Having the trailer appear there was a treasured memory for me," says Shouldice. "I don't know if it's a warm, fuzzy memory because I lost a lot of heartbeats that day. But that will definitely stick with me."

While the team had been working on Tunic for three years, 2018 was the first time many people became aware of the game and began watching its development. That group of new fans included various game makers, who connected with the project and, consequently, began incorporating some of its ideas into their work. "Every now and again, people will say that they're drawing inspiration from [Tunic]," says Shouldice. "And given that this game so deeply draws its inspiration from other things, it's pretty special to hear that other people can see it and, you know, feel that same feeling and want to make stuff themselves."

One of those people was Eric Billingsley, who began working on Tunic as a level designer in 2020. "Previous to that, I was working on my own solo thing, Spring Falls, and Tunic was one of the visual references I was using. So, it was exciting to come on to [Tunic]," says Billingsley. "At that point, the game was pretty much solidified in most of the areas, but a lot of the areas still didn't look final yet. So, my job was to go in and bring those areas – make them look nice, like the stuff that had already been seen in the game."

Developing Difficulties

Having admired the game from the sidelines, Tunic's newest member may have been excited to get started, but he was also realistic. The level designer was stepping into the middle of an ongoing and years-long development process. Thinking back over that time now, Billingsley recalls not only his continuing enthusiasm but also the obstacles he faced in his new role.

"One of the biggest challenges I found is, because the game is so stylized, sometimes it's hard to tell when things look finished or not," says Billingsley. "If you go too detailed, it doesn't look like Tunic anymore, and if it's not detailed enough, it doesn't look like a finished thing. And keeping track of how everything is connected is even sometimes a challenge when it comes to level design."

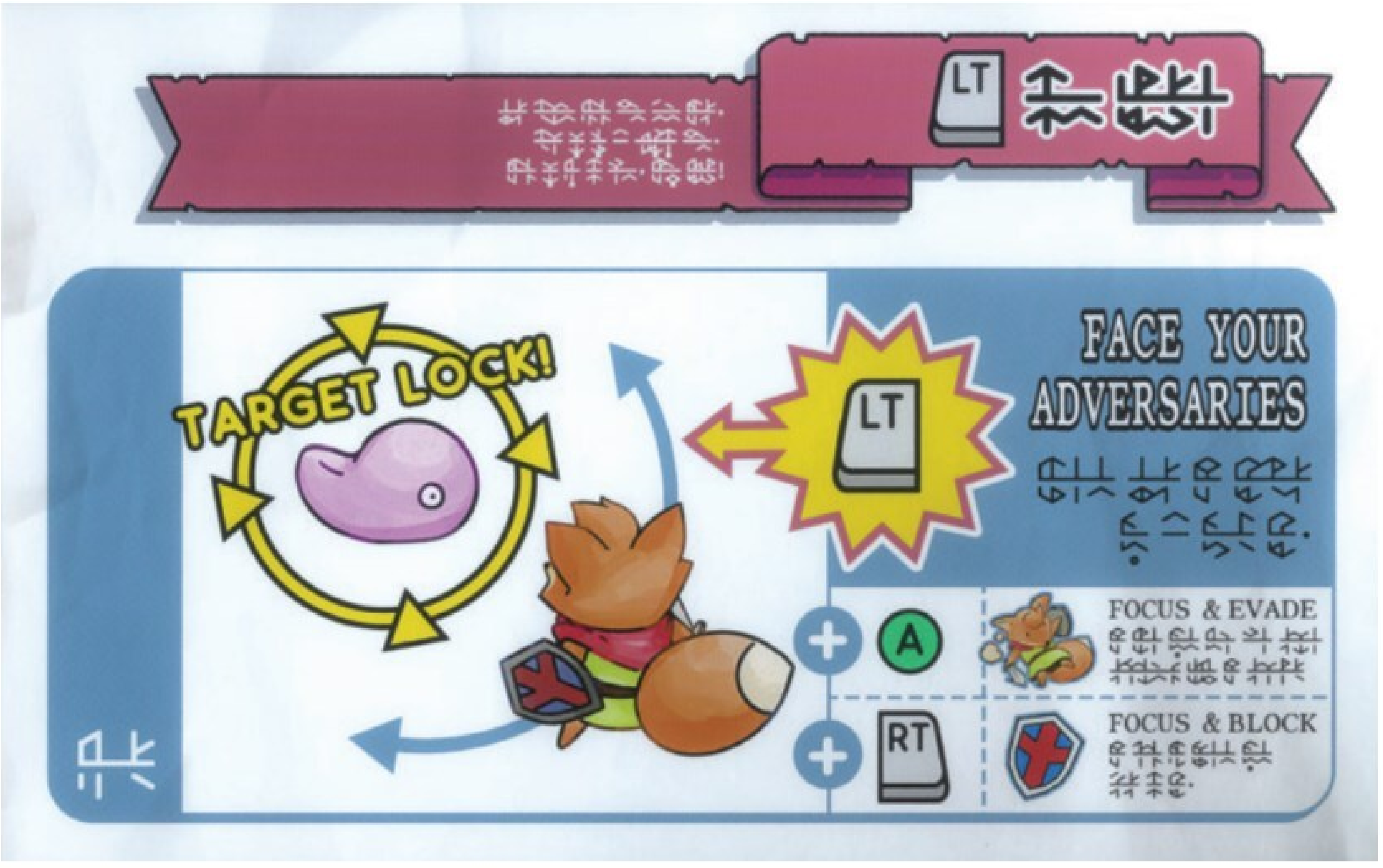
But many problematic aspects of Tunic's design also feed the game's strengths. Tunic's isometric perspective, for example, initially felt limiting to several team members. Billingsley acknowledges the view could be restrictive, but "the hidden benefit of that is now it's very easy to hide little secret paths." Conveniently, this plays right into Shouldice's vision of a game stuffed with secrets that prompt engaged exploration.

Power Up Audio's Kevin Regamey also weighed in on the isometric perspective, saying it could "result in you hearing things that you can't even see because [the sound's source is] beneath the pane of the camera view." But, mirroring level design, this constraint turned out to be a blessing in disguise. "As it stands now, there's basically no 3D audio in the game, in the traditional sense," says Regamey. "Everything's playing back in 2D; it's just like playing sounds. And it feels a little more one-to-one with how things were done back in the day." Again, that unexpected result reinforces Tunic's direction, this time emphasizing its nostalgic sensibilities.

How Time Flies

The fully assembled team has been working furiously on Tunic over the past few years to prepare it for its 2022 launch. But some fans have been aware of the project since 2018, and have been waiting nearly four years to get their hands on the game, a fact not lost on Tunic's lead developer.

"I'm the person that's responsible for the development time, I think," says Shouldice. Starting on this project nearly seven years ago, the developer admits his inexperience slowed things throughout development.



"There was content creation and level design and learning how to make good animations and all those sorts of things," he says. "I think it's probably safe to say – maybe the others could correct me – there's no part of this game that has not been revised at least once or twice. I think the model of the key that you get early in the game might be the first version of itself. But a lot of other things are second-generation assets that have been rebuilt as I've learned more about what this game is."

Eagerly admitting the process took longer than any of them expected, his teammates point to other reasons for the extended development. Composer Terence Lee muses on how, in the beginning, no one really knew what the final project would even look like, resulting in ever-shifting work. Additionally, the game's audio and level designers emphasize some time-consuming but necessary changes demanded a sizable chunk of the developers' time.

"It's a small, small team," asserts Billingsley. "There was no way to do this project very, very quickly." Especially since, according to Billingsley, the original size of the game was "twice as big, but it was mostly empty space." Regamey, though hesitant to talk about cut parts of the game for fear of disappointing fans, did go on to reveal one section of Tunic that eventually got the ax.

"There once was a desert in Tunic," Regamey explains. "There is no longer a desert because running across dunes was decidedly not as interesting as the other parts of the game."

The Final Stretch

The team can finally see the finish line after revealing Tunic's March 16 release date at The Game Awards in December. The announcement was a big achievement for the Tunic crew, as their trailer opened the massive show – which scored a record-breaking 85 million livestream views that year. Now that the release date is upon us, it's hard for many of Tunic's creators to decide whether they are relieved or nervous that the journey is almost over.

However, Shouldice takes one last moment to share his wish that Tunic "managed to capture that sort of childlike wonder" the games in his childhood inspired. "And whether or not people get that feeling from the finished game," says Shouldice, "I don't know. I hope so." ■

ONE LAST THING

BUNGIE'S WILD RIDE

A timeline of financial dealings that have shaped one of gaming's most impactful studios

BY MATT MILLER

1991

Bungie founded. Early development is on Macintosh games like Marathon and Myth.

2000

Microsoft purchases Bungie in a deal estimated at $20-40 million, setting the stage for Halo's reshaping of the console FPS scene on Xbox.

2007

Bungie splits from Microsoft but continues a relationship with the Halo brand for several years.

2010

Bungie teams up with Activision for a planned 10-year publishing agreement, which will ultimately result in Destiny, a game that helps popularize the shared-world hobby game movement.

2019

A break from Activision leaves Bungie independent to continue further development of the Destiny franchise with full creative control, and the studio reportedly begins to explore new projects.

2022

Sony announces it will acquire Bungie for $3.6 billion. The studio is set to remain an independent multi-platform subsidiary, hinting at a shift in thinking around game developer consolidation. ■

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